

Chapter 1 - The Boy Who Died

Albus Dumbledore stared thoughtfully at the ancient wooden box lying on a shelf in the Founders cabinet, between the sword of Godric Gryffindor and the Sorting Hat. The box was long, thin and decorated with tiny griffins, flying about in intricate geometric patterns. After a few moments of deep contemplation, he waved his wand at it, uttering an incantation which caused the lid to hinge back. A glow of pure white light surged from the box for a moment, and then a dark brown wand rose gracefully upwards, floating into his outstretched hand.

As he felt the gentle surge of power running through the wand he knew with certainty that the 'dream' from which he had just awoken was not just a dream, but a vision; a communication from the world of witches and wizards long departed from this earth.

He had dozed off, as was his wont, when the demands of the world permitted such luxuries, in the late morning warmth of his sun-filled office. Slowly, he became aware of a beautiful, yet strangely haunting, song which seemed at first to come from far away, but grew gradually nearer. A white glow appeared all around him. Then slowly it began to coalesce, finally taking the form of a wizard. It was a wizard, whom he knew very well, from the many pictures and sculptures of the Founders, that were displayed about Hogwarts. It was Godric Gryffindor – or perhaps more correctly, the spirit of Godric Gryffindor.

"I come bearing a message from the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light," said the spirit, in an unearthly voice.

"We are very concerned about the rise of Voldemort and the forces of the Dark. The Light is in very grave danger. The very future of Wizardkind, hangs precariously in the balance.

"As you must know, we of the spirit world are unable to act directly in the world of the living. We have, however, devised a way to help those on the side of the Light, in the momentous struggle which lies ahead."

"But how is that possible?" asked Dumbledore.

“The soul of a boy, recently departed from the world, has been selected for the purpose. Each of the great witches and wizards of the Light has blessed that soul with their own particular powers and magic. It was a formidable challenge, to find a soul that was worthy of such gifts, one with qualities of goodness, compassion, bravery and selflessness. The temptation to abuse such enormous powers will be strong.”

“But who can it be?” mused Dumbledore. “Someone recently died? I cannot think of anyone with such outstanding moral qualities.”

“Ah, but he is not from your world; and yet he knows all about it. I think you will be surprised. He will appear in this very office at midday. You shall call him by the name of ‘Rick Godfry’. I would like you to give him my own wand that has lain these past thousand years in the Founders cabinet.”

With that, the image of Godric Gryffindor was gone, and the vision ended.

Albus Dumbledore placed the wand of Godric Gryffindor on his desk. It was midday; he felt great anticipation, but more than that, a sense of optimism and hope that he had not felt for many months. After the events of the last school year that had culminated in the confrontation with the Death Eaters, and finally Voldemort himself, at the Ministry of Magic, the wizarding world had slowly descended into darkness.

Although Fudge had finally been forced to acknowledge the return of Voldemort, his response had been far worse than his previous policy at pretending it was all a just a fairytale invented by Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter.

Fudge immediately declared a ‘State of Emergency’. He issued a decree dissolving the Wizengamot and all judicial bodies. He issued decrees dissolving all Ministry committees and vested all powers in the Minister of Magic – himself, Cornelius Fudge. He imposed total

censorship on the media, so there was no longer a platform to voice dissent or criticise these authoritarian measures.

All of this was done in the name of security. But in fact Fudge was doing nothing at all to resist Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The Auror division had been decimated, all but the few 'yes witches and wizards' who were prepared to do Fudge's bidding, with 'no questions asked' had been removed. Those that remained were not engaged in battling Death Eaters, but enforcing Fudge's draconian 'State of Emergency'.

Most of the Death Eaters involved in the battle at the Ministry of Magic had claimed to be under the Imperious Curse and had been pardoned by Fudge – who was rumoured to have received barrow loads of gold from Lucius Malfoy for his 'mercy'. Only those, like the Lestranges, who had recently escaped from Azkaban were convicted, but no one knew what had happened to them or where they were. Most likely, they were back in the service of Voldemort.

The only opposition to Voldemort was from the Order of the Phoenix. Fudge had issued a decree outlawing the Order and declaring them an 'Enemy of Wizardkind'.

"What on earth is Fudge's game?" was a question frequently bandied about in the Order. Albus Dumbledore doubted that Fudge was a Death Eater or even particularly sympathetic to Voldemort's cause. But still he was clearly in their pocket, or more precisely Lucius Malfoy's pockets, which were deep and lined with gold. Fudge was rumoured to have stashed away a mountain of gold in his Gringotts vault. But Dumbledore considered it was probably more than plain avarice which motivated Fudge – it was his lust for power. Fudge was determined to keep hold of the reigns of power, no matter what, come hell or high water – or Voldemort. Perhaps he had decided that the Dark Lord was likely to win in the end, and if he was compliant, and did the bidding of Malfoy and Voldemort's other proxies, he would be seen as an asset by the Dark Lord and left alone to his little empire.

Dumbledore's reverie was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a very startled-looking boy, standing just a few feet away from his great desk. Dumbledore rose to greet the boy, who jumped back from him with an expression on his face of utter disbelief and shock. "Albus ... Dumbledore?" he muttered to himself. "How can that be? No ... this is just a dream."

"Oh no," said Dumbledore, "this is not a dream. I am most certainly Professor Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and it is my great pleasure, Rick Godfry, to welcome you to Hogwarts."

"Rick Godfry?" said the boy. "My name's not Rick Godfry, my name is, err ... um ... my name's ... um ..." After some moments of anguished thought he finally said, "How is it that I can't remember my own name and yet I know yours, how can that be?"

"Well Rick," mused Dumbledore nodding his head thoughtfully from side to side, "Death is perhaps the greatest mystery of life. There are many theories speculating about the journey of the soul upon death, but no one really knows with any certainty, what happens."

"What?" said the shocked boy, "Are you telling me I died...." He paused for a moment and then looking around in astonishment, continued, "... and this is Heaven?"

"No Rick," laughed Dumbledore. "Our world – the wizarding world – is not Heaven. Sadly, it is very far from that happy state at this time. But yes, it is true that you died. Can you remember nothing at all about your death, or your previous life?"

The boy stood lost in thought for a minute or two, slowly shaking his head from side to side. He was trying to grasp at the elusive memories of the life he had lost, but they seemed to slip away and dissolve as he reached out towards them. Dumbledore took the opportunity to scrutinise the boy standing before him.

About sixteen, he thought to himself. Yes, of course, they chose someone the same age as Harry Potter, for surely they will become comrades. He was a handsome boy, with dark brown hair and warm

affectionate brown eyes. His height and physique were average. He had more the look of a scholar than an athlete. It was difficult to say exactly what it was about him that was so attractive, yet he had a palpable charm, an inner glow, almost. A gift from Helga Hufflepuff perhaps? thought Dumbledore.

“It’s very strange,” said the boy, “but I can remember hardly anything about my life. I can’t even remember my parents or if I had sisters or brothers. All I can remember is sitting in the back of a car, driving down from the mountains. I must have lived in the mountains, I think. I remember that I was on my way to town, to see a movie, ‘Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban’.”

Dumbledore looked a little surprised at this, but allowed the boy to continue. “What is so baffling, is that while I can remember nothing of my own life, I can remember everything about the world of Harry Potter, all the books and movies, and the countless fanfics.”

“Harry Potter books? What on earth are you talking about? Movies? I’ve heard that word before ... ah, yes, those funny moving picture things that Muggles find so entertaining. But why would Muggles have books or movies about Harry Potter? Surely they know nothing about him.”

“Well, actually Professor Dumbledore, I’m a Muggle. What I can remember from the world I came from, is that there were no wizards or witches – and no magic. Those things were make believe – they only existed in stories. The most famous of those stories, was about a boy named Harry Potter. About his friends, and his battles with the Dark Lord, Voldemort, who killed his parents when he was just a baby.”

“How utterly extraordinary,” murmured Dumbledore, shaking his head, his eyebrows shooting up in astonishment. The universe never failed to amaze him.

“You have no idea how popular Harry Potter has become in my world,” said the boy. “Some people have become quite obsessed with him and his world.”

“And if I am not very much mistaken,” said Dumbledore smiling at him, “you were one of them. Am I correct?”

The boy nodded. He had indeed been obsessed with Harry Potter and the wizarding world. Apart from the books and movies and the endless fanfics, he could recall spending many of his waking hours daydreaming about that world, imagining and wishing he was part of it.

“Professor Dumbledore,” he asked thoughtfully, “do you think it’s possible, that my obsession with your world has somehow caused me to ... appear in it?”

Dumbledore mused for a few moments before answering. “Life is a great mystery, my young friend. As I said before, no one really knows what happens when we die. Some people believe that our soul reincarnates, passing from one life to the next. They believe that the thoughts and desires we have during our life actually create the world into which we are subsequently reborn. It seems to me that something like that may have happened to you.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” said the boy. “Firstly, you get born as a baby, not a teenager; and secondly, this world already existed, so how could I have created it.”

“Well, to answer the second question first. If we do create the world we are born into, from the desires and volitions of our previous life, that world must have already been in existence – or we could not be born into it. I know it seems like a contradiction, if you think of time as linear, with events following one after the other.”

“But, perhaps time is not linear. Perhaps before I die I will dream longingly of a peaceful world in which men and women have lived in love and harmony for hundreds of thousands of years – and that very desire will make it real, bring it into existence, as if it had always existed. Yes, what a wonderful idea, I think I might just give it a try – and that world will have the most wonderful, delicious sweets imaginable....”

“You mean to say, that if a person is obsessed about some imaginary world and daydreams about it, and all the people in it, that their thoughts might somehow ‘create’ that world for them to be reborn into after they die?”

“Yes, indeed. There are whole religious systems of belief based upon such ideas.”

“What about the answer to my first question?” asked the boy. “People are born as babies, but I am obviously a teenager.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, “perhaps you should sit down.” He waved his hand to summon a chair for Rick. “You see ... you were not actually born into this world ... you were sent here.” He then proceeded to explain what Godric Gryffindor had revealed to him in the vision.

Rick just sat there with his mouth agape after Dumbledore had finished. Although he could remember nothing of the personal circumstances of his previous life, he was quite certain that he had been a Muggle and had never performed a single act of magic. Why would the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light have chosen him, or his spirit or soul or whatever it was for such an important task? It just didn’t make any sense and he didn’t feel especially magical or powerful, so it must all be a huge mistake.

Did he even have the qualities of goodness, compassion, and bravery that Godric Gryffindor had spoken of to Dumbledore? Rick had no idea. He just couldn’t remember anything about himself in his previous life; not even what he had looked like. Perhaps it was exactly the way he looked now or perhaps it was totally different. For all he knew he had might have been a girl. He didn’t think his name had been Rick Godfry anyway. It just didn’t feel right. The only thing he could remember was his obsession with the world of Harry Potter and then he realised that he must have been a boy. He clearly recalled an infatuation with one particular witch.

Dumbledore smiled gently at Rick, seeming to understand the doubts and confusion that were churning through his mind. Picking up Godric Gryffindor’s wand, he handed it to Rick, saying, “Perhaps this will help to convince you.”

When Rick's hand touched the wand it was as if a switch had been thrown within him. It was like somehow being connected to unknown forces or beings, beyond his own body. Perhaps they were the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light that Dumbledore had spoken of.

It didn't feel so much as if they had entered his body, but more like his mind and soul had somehow expanded to merge with theirs. He could not identify who or what these powers or beings were. But it felt to him, that he could know anything that they knew or perform any magic or use any power that they had, if he needed it. He smiled and nodded to Dumbledore to acknowledge that what he had told him must indeed be true.

Dumbledore told him about recent events in the wizarding world, of how the Ministry of Magic was under the influence of Lucius Malfoy and of Fudge's single-minded attempts to retain power at all costs.

"The Order of the Phoenix is now the only thing preventing Voldemort and his Death Eaters from taking total control. But dedicated as we are, our numbers are too few to withstand the forces of the Dark – which are daily increasing – if Voldemort should choose an all-out confrontation."

"So what's stopping Voldemort from launching a final attack?" asked Rick.

"The Prophecy," said Dumbledore. "Voldemort spent a great deal of effort trying to obtain the full prophecy, as he only knew the first part. When it became clear that Lucius Malfoy had Fudge and the Ministry in his pocket and that the power of the Dark Forces had become almost unstoppable, I decided, upon one last desperate gambit. I allowed Voldemort to acquire the full prophecy. It goes....

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with

the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.”

While listening to Dumbledore, Rick had put Godric Gryffindor’s wand back on the desk, noticing that the effect from holding it had not ceased. That initial touch had initiated the link with the unknown forces, but it did not seem necessary to keep hold of the wand to maintain it. Rick was about to ask Dumbledore why he had wanted Voldemort to know the full prophecy, but as soon as the question appeared in his mind, so too, did the answer.

“You hoped that Voldemort would become so obsessed with killing Harry Potter, that he would make it his top priority. He would be afraid to make his final move until he was certain that Harry Potter was dead, once and for all, and no longer posed a threat to him. Because Harry Potter is the only thing that stands between him and his most cherished goal, Immortality....” said Rick, wondering how he knew all this.

“My goodness,” said Dumbledore. “You appear to be blessed with an unparalleled ability for Legilimency, which can only have come from Merlin himself – for those were my very thoughts. Although I am highly skilled in the art of Occlumency, you read them perfectly, without my even noticing. I suggest that you try to hide this skill. It will be very, very useful to you ... but, should it be known, it might make you somewhat unpopular. Most people feel very uncomfortable at the idea that another person can read their thoughts. I suggest you learn how to control your Legilimency and use it only when required. Otherwise you may find life a little chaotic – I am sure you will not want to be deluged with the unspoken thoughts of everyone in the Great Hall at breakfast each morning.”

“Err ... no,” said Rick, feeling a little embarrassed at his unintended invasion of the Headmaster’s mind. “I guess I am going to have to learn how to control all the powers I have received, so that it just looks like the normal magic of a sixteen year-old wizard. But how am I going to explain my sudden appearance at Hogwarts, sir?”

Dumbledore had obviously thought about this. “At the Welcoming Feast, tomorrow evening, you will simply be introduced as a sixth

year student who is joining Hogwarts from the remote mountains of New Zealand, where there are no schools of magic. From your accent, you could very well be from that part of the world. When asked, you will say that you are an orphan, brought up by Muggles. You can say that you do not know who your real parents are – that way you cannot be traced or have your story challenged.”

“You will say that a few years ago, a friend of your foster parents, who turned out to be a very powerful wizard, recognised your magical abilities, and began giving you private instruction. However, because there were areas of wizarding knowledge that he was unable to teach satisfactorily, he decided to enrol you at Hogwarts to complete your magical education.”

“This will help account for any surprising magical abilities you may show, particularly if you perform magic that is not in the Hogwarts curriculum or known to your professors. It will also cover any initial deficiencies of knowledge in other areas, such as Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures etc, although I suspect that you may turn out to be a fast learner.”

Rick looked horrified as he realised how much he didn’t know that a student who had spent the past five years at Hogwarts would know. Sensing his distress, Dumbledore carefully selected a large book from a bookshelf.

“Let us try a little experiment, shall we, Rick?” he said, handing the book to Rick with an encouraging smile. “Try to ‘absorb’ its contents.” Rick looked at the huge tome in his hands. It was ‘Hogwarts, a History’.

Concentrating on it for a moment, he suddenly became aware that he knew everything that was in it, as if he had studied it for months and memorized every word and picture. “Amazing,” he said. “This gives ‘speed reading’ a whole new meaning.”

“Just as I thought,” said Dumbledore smiling, “Rowena Ravenclaw has blessed you with her gift of ‘speed reading’ ... as you call it.”

“But it is time for you to leave. I do not want any of the Hogwarts Professors to discover you here. It is not that I don’t trust them, but our greatest weapon is to keep your true abilities secret for as long as possible; and the best way to do that is to hide them from everyone, Hogwarts Professors, fellow students, even Harry Potter. In fact, especially from Harry. Until you absolutely have to reveal yourself to him.”

“But why? Protecting Harry will be one of my main objectives. Surely I can be more effective if he knows.”

“Protecting Harry is your number one priority,” said Dumbledore. “Since I ‘leaked’ the Prophecy to Voldemort, Death Eater activity has diminished to very occasional attacks on strategic targets. I have it on good authority that Voldemort will not make his move while Harry is still alive. Harry Potter is all that stands between us and the ‘Deluge’.”

“Harry has been very angry and somewhat unstable since the death of Sirius Black, for which he blames himself. I am afraid that I have not helped by hiding things from him over the years, even though it was with the best of intentions. I am not sure that he fully trusts me any longer. Now, with his godfather gone, he has no one he trusts enough, to turn to for help.”

“Hiding things from him was a mistake ... but perhaps revealing the Prophecy to him was an even greater mistake,” said Dumbledore sadly, letting out a heart-felt sigh. “For now he knows that he must kill Voldemort or die in the attempt.”

“It is not the fear of death that is playing upon his mind, for he is as brave a Gryffindor as ever walked the halls of Hogwarts. Rather it is his fear of failing the wizarding world and being responsible for the untold deaths and misery that would be the certain consequence of Voldemort’s victory,” he added.

“This sense of responsibility is, I fear, crushing Harry. You must convince him with deeds – not words – that he is not alone – that help is at hand, and victory over the Dark Forces is possible.”

“So where will I go, until school starts tomorrow?” asked Rick.

“You will go to Diagon Alley, where you will buy all the clothes you will need – including your Hogwarts robes – your books, and other school supplies,” said Dumbledore, handing him his sixth-year booklist.

“While you are at Flourish and Blotts, I suggest that you go to the curriculum section where you will find the required texts for each year at Hogwarts on a separate shelf. Perhaps a little ‘speed reading’ may be in order.... You will take a room at the Leaky Cauldron tonight, and Apparate directly to platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross station tomorrow, around ten-thirty.”

“But ... but I don't have any wizard money; and I don't know how to Apparate; and what if they don't have a free room at the Leaky Cauldron?” protested Rick in alarm.

“I have taken the liberty of owling a reservation in your name to Tom at the Leaky Cauldron,” said Dumbledore in a reassuring voice. “Please remember, Rick: you have the powers of the greatest witches and wizards who ever lived – I think you will be surprised at your magical abilities. For example, if you put your hand in your pocket wanting to take out some Galleons to make a purchase, I am sure that you will always find them in sufficient number there. It is an ability you will have inherited from my late friend, Nicolas Flamel.”

“As for Apparating – all you need to do is concentrate your mind on wherever you wish to be – and you shall be there. Of course, I must warn you that you are not yet of a legal age – nor do you possess the required licence – to Apparate. So I would advise you to make yourself invisible first. Then, upon arrival, when you are certain no one is watching, you can make yourself visible again. Like many of the great witches and wizards of the Light, you will have the ability to perform wandless magic. In order to conceal this, you must remember to wave your wand when doing magic.”

“In fact, until school begins, you are subject to the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. In your mind project a shield around your body which is impenetrable to the minds of others. This is a very advanced Occlumency skill, which will also serve to protect you from whatever means the Ministry have of detecting

underage magic.” Dumbledore paused a moment while Rick closed his eyes and followed his instruction.

“I see that you are a little sceptical,” said Dumbledore, smiling reassuringly at Rick. “I am quite certain that you have these, and many other powers, besides. I know the witches and wizards of the Light who manifested them, and I know that they have blessed you with them. You will, no doubt, have noted during your ‘perusal’ of ‘Hogwarts, a History’ that it is not possible to Apparate to or Disapparate from Hogwarts – however, I think you may find that it does not apply to you. Godric Gryffindor possessed the ability to Apparate, unharmed, through all magical wards and barriers – I am certain he has bestowed this skill on you.”

“There is one final thing I would like to add: You are not omnipotent – your magic is limited to the powers that were bestowed upon you by the great witches and wizards of the Light. For example, you will be totally incapable of performing Dark Magic. While the nature of your ‘birth’ and your great magical abilities are unusual, to say the least, your life henceforth will be subject to all the usual laws of nature of this world. You are not immortal – and you cannot return to your previous existence. You will age, perhaps raise a family, and eventually die in this world, like other witches and wizards.”

“This is another reason that I would counsel you to keep the circumstances of your ‘birth’, and of the blessings bestowed upon you, a secret from as many people as possible. Since you seem to be familiar with the story of Harry Potter, you will be aware of the unpleasant burden that comes with fame.”

“Assuming we win the coming war – and you survive – you have a long life ahead of you. If the truth about you were known, you would probably find the fame and notoriety, unbearable.”

With that, the Headmaster rose to his feet, and handed Gryffindor’s wand back to Rick, who tucked it into the inside pocket of his Muggle jacket. Dumbledore extended his hand, grasping Rick’s firmly, and said, “Take things slowly, you have a lot to learn. Good luck and goodbye, for now.” Rick smiled at him and Dumbledore noted with

satisfaction the look of brave determination on his face, as he disappeared from his office.

If you like this fic, please take the time to leave a review at the end of each chapter ... it only takes a moment ... and you will make the author VERY HAPPY!!

Chapter 2 - (Attempted) Murder on the Hogwarts Express

Rick Apparated invisibly to Diagon Alley, as instructed by Professor Dumbledore. He ducked into a narrow alleyway, and after checking that it was empty, focused his mind on making himself visible. He enjoyed his afternoon – it was, to say the least, magical.

He decided to keep a low profile. The intention to pass unnoticed seemed to have created a Disillusionment Charm, because no one paid him any attention after that, unless he addressed them directly. Rick thought of it as his Wizard Repelling charm, because it seemed to work much the same way as a Muggle Repelling charm, except on witches and wizards instead of Muggles.

He went to Madam Malkin's for his clothes. They even had silk boxers with flying magical creatures zooming around, but luckily you couldn't feel them when you had them on, that might have been a bit ticklish.

He found that the Cauldron Shop opposite the apothecary sold trunks and boxes of all sizes and shapes, not just cases for cauldrons. He bought a large trunk to store all his new acquisitions. He threw in the bags from Madam Malkin's along with the cauldron he had just purchased.

The witch at the Cauldron Shop was very obliging. Noticing his long list of purchases, she invited him to leave his trunk with her, while he got the rest of his things. "Thanks," said Rick politely, wondering why she was blushing and being so friendly.

Next, he went to Flourish and Blotts for his books, which he carried back and placed in his trunk. Then it was on to Slug & Jiggers Apothecary for his Potions supplies and the Stationary Shop for ink, quills, and parchment.

When he had everything on the list, he decided to drop his trunk off at the Leaky Cauldron. Thanking the obliging witch at the Cauldron Shop, Rick dragged his heavy trunk out into Diagon Alley. He knew that as an underage wizard, he wasn't allowed to do magic so he couldn't levitate it. Luckily the Leaky Cauldron was very close by.

Tom the innkeeper had a room reserved for him – just as Dumbledore had promised – and showed him up. Risk decided to change into some of his new Wizarding clothes.

Although he had not been the only one dressed in Muggle clothes in Diagon Alley, he had felt conspicuous and had kept his eyes down despite the disillusionment charm he had cast upon himself. Now all dressed up as a wizard, he removed the disillusionment charm and smiled at himself in the mirror. It suddenly started speaking to him in a husky female voice:

“Oh my, oh my ... what a handsome wizard. Gilderoy Lockhart, eat your heart out, no more Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile awards for you, Gildy dear. If you smile like that, my young ‘Prince Charming’, you are going to have every witch in Diagon Alley falling at your feet.”

Rick stepped back in surprise. It was rather nice being coo-ed over, even if it was only a talking mirror, although he wasn't sure that he liked being compared to Gilderoy Lockhart. The thought of witches being attracted to him was quite appealing to a teenage boy, well maybe not all witches, but certainly one particular witch ... Rick sighed.

He began to wonder if Casanova had been a wizard and was maybe amongst the ones who had bestowed their gifts upon him. There must be some explanation for this, he thought. Then he remembered reading about Helga Hufflepuff in ‘Hogwarts, a History’ and how she was so charming that everyone loved her. Maybe if I try not to smile, he thought, assuming a more serious expression and looking in the mirror again. “Do you still find me so charming?” he asked.

“Well, you are still a most handsome wizard, but if you hold back the charm like that, you might have a quieter life.”

Rick spent the next ten minutes, standing in front of the bemused mirror, using its reactions to learn how to control his gift of charm. As much as it might be fun to have witches falling at his feet, it would hinder his mission. He was just going to have to be careful to resist the temptation. There might be times when he could use his charm ‘in

the line of duty', but other than that, he was going to have to keep it under tight control.

Rick stepped back into Diagon Alley and made his way to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour and sat down in a quiet corner. He was dying to try one of Florean's fabled sundaes. He ordered a chocolate and raspberry with chopped nut sundae, which definitely lived up to expectations. After that he decided to head back to Flourish and Blotts for a little 'speed reading', as the Headmaster had suggested.

It didn't take him long to work his way through all the Hogwarts curriculum books starting at first year on the bottom shelf, he quickly made his way up to year seven on the top shelf. He found that all he had to do, was concentrate and run a finger along the spine of each book on the shelf. After that he decided to do the Defence Against the Dark Arts section, which was quite large. Could be useful, he thought to himself and it was definitely more interesting than 'The Standard Book of Spells' (Grades 1 to 7) by Miranda Goshawk.

It was so interesting, in fact, that he forgot to look around to check that no one was watching his peculiar behaviour – someone was watching – and becoming more curious by the minute. But it wasn't until Rick had almost tripped over the unseen witch that she yelled out, "Excuse me! Would you please pay attention to where you are going, you almost stepped on me!"

Rick quickly pulled back his hand from the books, turned, and on seeing the witch who had startled him, blurted out in surprise, "Hermione!" before catching himself, and blushing fiercely.

"Who are you?" demanded the witch, with hands on hips. "And how do you know my name? I've never seen you before in my life."

"Umm, know your name?" said Rick, recovering his poise quickly. "Why do you say that? I have no idea who you are."

"Because," said the witch, "you just said it – Hermione – now stop playing games and tell me how you knew my name."

“Hermione? No, I didn’t know that was your name ... no, I just said, err ... ‘Oh my, oh me’.”

“And why would you utter such silly gibberish?” asked Hermione, raising her eyebrows in an attitude of deep scepticism.

“Umm ... err ... because you are a most ... beautiful witch,” replied Rick smiling sweetly, attempting to charm his way out of the mess he’d gotten himself into. Rick was pleased with the result. Hermione’s expression was no longer aggressive and confrontational. She looked a little embarrassed, but was clearly flattered by Rick’s comment – or more likely – his magical charm.

“Allow me to introduce myself; my name is Rick Godfry. I’ll be starting as a sixth year student at Hogwarts tomorrow,” he said, trying with great difficulty to tone down the charm.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure. I’m Hermione Granger, and I am a sixth year Gryffindor prefect.” Rick was having real trouble holding back the charm now. He knew that it wasn’t right to use his gifts like this. He should only use them to fight for the Light. But standing before him was the witch he had dreamt about so often, he could not stop staring at her and she too seemed unable to break their eye contact.

Luckily – or perhaps unluckily – a large redhead came upon them like that, their eyes locked upon each other. “Who the hell are you?” he said, pushing himself between them and towering over Rick in a threatening stance.

“Ron,” said Hermione awkwardly. She seemed to have recovered from her encounter with Rick, now that the contact was broken. She carried on more assertively, “You and Harry were supposed to meet me here forty-five minutes ago. Have you two been in Quality Quidditch Supplies for the last hour and a half?”

Ron turned around to face Hermione trying to look innocent. “Are you sure it’s been that long? Well I never heard you complain about having to wait in a book shop before,” he smiled winningly.

“Humph,” said Hermione, as they walked away from Rick, forgetting about him completely. “Where’s Harry? We better find him and get back to the Burrow, your mother will have dinner ready and be wondering where we are by now.”

The Wizard Repelling charm that Rick had cast upon them had worked a treat, they walked away without so much as a backward glance at him.

He thought back to what had happened when he had first seen Hermione and how his attraction to her had resulted in the unintentional charm which he had found so hard to break. That must be what Godric Gryffindor had meant when he said to Professor Dumbledore that the temptation to abuse such great power will be strong. He was really going to need constant vigilance, as Moody would say, to stop himself from doing things like that.

The following morning, Rick Apparated to platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross station. He got there early, so he was immediately able to become visible. He knew that it was important to make the right impression on his fellow students and teachers if his mission was going to be a success. He has already decided that he needed to be in Gryffindor, so that he could stay close to Harry. And Hermione – no, that would just be an incidental bonus, he tried to convince himself. Now all I have to do is persuade the Hogwarts Sorting Hat!

From his booklist it looked like Professor Dumbledore had given him the same subjects as Harry. The real difficulty was going to be to win Harry’s trust, without revealing who he was and why he had come. And then there were his feelings for Hermione, which were just going to make it much more complicated.

Rick boarded the Hogwarts Express, which was almost empty as it was not due to leave for another forty minutes. He found an empty compartment and put his trunk up into the overhead rack. Then he sat by the window staring out at the platform as it slowly filled up with students and their families. It was fun trying to put names to all the faces. The Weasleys were impossible to miss. Harry and Hermione were with them. Apart from Ron and Ginny, Fred and George, who

had departed Hogwarts in style the year before, were also there for the occasion.

But Fred and George were looking around alertly, and not joking about, as he would have expected. Maybe they have joined the Order of the Phoenix, thought Rick. Looking around he noticed a woman who just had to be Nymphadora Tonks; the purple hair was a dead giveaway. The Order was clearly out in force, which meant that they were worried about a Death Eater attack; perhaps an attempt to kill Harry, before he reached the safety of Hogwarts.

Rick's thoughts were interrupted when the door to his compartment opened. Two Slytherin witches entered. "Well hello, I'm Pansy Parkinson," said the blonde witch batting her eyelids coquettishly at Rick, "and who may I ask, are you?"

"Rick Godfry, I'm new at Hogwarts, I'll be in sixth year."

"Mmmm," purred Pansy. "Charmed to meet you I'm sure, I do hope that the Sorting Hat puts you in Slytherin, we could do with some handsome wizards. Not that Draco isn't handsome of course, but then there are those great lumps Crabbe and Goyle."

"Well you won't have to worry about that pair this year, I hear that they failed their OWLS so abysmally that they won't even be back," said the big-boned, dark haired witch, pushing her trunk up onto the rack and sitting down. "I'm Millicent Bulstrode," she said to Rick with a coy smile, that didn't become her. "But I've have heard nothing about any new wizards in sixth year. My aunt is on the Hogwarts board you know, and she tells me everything."

"Well, it was all arranged at the last moment," said Rick noticing that the train had started moving, "so I guess the news hasn't got around yet."

"Where are you from?" asked Pansy. "Are your people Purebloods – you won't get into Slytherin if they're not, you know."

Rick was saved from having to answer her. The door opened, to reveal Draco Malfoy, with Blaise Zabini standing behind him. "Who

are you, and what are you doing in our compartment?" Draco demanded arrogantly of Rick, swinging an immaculately polished mahogany trunk onto the rack and plopping himself down on a seat as if he owned the compartment, if not the whole train. Blaise took the seat beside him.

"Pleased to meet you too," said Rick trying to maintain a friendly tone, wondering if his charm worked on wizards as well. "But I was actually the first one in this compartment and I didn't notice any 'Reserved' signs."

"Oh Draco dear," gushed Pansy. "It's so nice to see you again, but please don't start a fight with Rick – he seems like such a dear. Anyway, we have to go up to the front in a few minutes, for the prefects meeting."

"I know," drawled Draco. "But before we go I have something to tell you three – just you three he said, looking pointedly at Rick. As their eyes met, Rick probed Draco's mind for what he was going to say."

"In about ten minutes the train will be stopped by servants of the Dark Lord. We have to get Potter off the train so they can kill him. Apparently, Dumbledore has placed some protection on the train which may stop the Dark Lord's servants from getting on to do the job. Stupid 'Hero Potter' will probably be the first one off anyway. But if he's not, we're to throw off some little firsties for them to attack, which will be sure to draw Potter out."

Draco hadn't noticed Rick's probe. Rick just shrugged and was about to get up to leave when the door slid open once more, this time to reveal Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Their glance rested on Rick for a moment before turning to Draco and Pansy.

"We are all waiting for you two to grace us with your presence at the prefects' meeting," said Hermione in an annoyed tone. "Although I don't think those who were part of Umbridge's little Inquisitorial Squad deserve to keep their prefect's badges."

"Well no one cares what you think Granger. Things are going to be different this year. My father is on the best of terms with the Minister

of Magic – did you know that? He has a great deal of influence. The days of Mudblood filth at Hogwarts will soon be over, you mark my words. Now why don't you and your pet weasel, just run along."

Ron tried to push past Hermione with the obvious intention of pouncing on Draco, but Hermione grabbed his arm, trying to drag him out, but without success. "Here, let me help," said Rick, jumping up and pushing Ron back till they were all out of the carriage.

"Get off of me you Slytherin git," Ron bellowed at Rick, his face red with fury. "After I've finished off that slimy little ferret, you'll be next." But before he could force his way back in to the compartment, the door was shut and locked behind them.

Hermione turned on Ron. "Ronald Weasley, how can you be so stupid? Can't you see that Malfoy is just trying to provoke you? If his father has so much influence, what do you think will happen if you beat up his precious little Draco? You'll lose your prefect's badge for starters and probably get expelled as well. You are just going to have to learn to control your temper and ignore his taunts. Now let's get to that prefects meeting. If those Slytherins don't want to come, that's fine, we'll start without them." Ron glared one last time at Rick before following Hermione towards the front of the train.

Right, thought Rick, I better find Harry fast. He shut his eyes for a moment and tried to conjure up an image of the train. Amazing, he thought to himself, it was just like a 'Marauders Map' of the train, right in his head. He noticed Kingsley Shacklebolt, from the Order in the guards van and Harry Potter alone in a compartment two carriages back. He quickly made his way to Harry's compartment, which he'd been sharing with Ron and Hermione. He took a deep breath and slid the door open.

Harry looked up with a guarded expression on his face as Rick entered. He knew all too well that his life was in danger and his suspicion was immediately raised by this unknown wizard entering his compartment. He whipped out his wand and pointed it at Rick's chest. "OK, just stop right there," he demanded, "and tell me who you are and what you're doing in this compartment."

Rick tried to smile reassuringly at Harry. He raised his hands in the air like in a cowboy movie. "OK, sheriff, please don't shoot, I'll go peaceably," he joked, pleased to see the hint of a smile on Harry's face. "Would you mind if I sat down for the interrogation?"

"OK," said Harry, "but don't make any sudden moves or go for your wand – I'm not joking."

Rick smiled and sat down carefully. "My name is Rick Godfry and I'm new to Hogwarts this year, I'll be in sixth year. So who are you – apart from the 'fasted wand in the west'?"

Harry did a double take. He couldn't remember anyone in the wizarding world ever asking him that question. Everyone seemed to know who he was, if not his whole life history.

"Harry Potter," he said. The wizard showed not the slightest reaction or recognition of his name, maybe he'd just arrived from Mars though Harry, unless of course it was all some kind of act.

"Where are you from?" asked Harry.

"New Zealand. There aren't any schools for young witches and wizards over there, which is why I'm going to Hogwarts."

"I guess there can't be a lot of witches and wizards in New Zealand if there are no schools," observed Harry.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't really know, I only found out that I was a wizard, a couple of years ago."

"Are your parents Muggles?"

"Well actually, I don't know. I'm an orphan, and I don't know anything at all about my real parents. They might have been magical, but I just don't know. The people who raised me were Muggles, but they had a friend who was a wizard, although they didn't know that until he discovered that I was magical too, and told us all about how witches and wizards are real and not just make believe. He's a very powerful

wizard. He works with the magical creatures that live up in the mountains. He taught me all the magic I know.”

Suddenly, the train began rapidly slowing. Harry looked nervously out the window, trying to see what was out there. When he turned back, Rick had gone. Harry saw the compartment door sliding shut behind him.

But Rick did more than just shut the door – he focussed his mind on locking it, and making it an impenetrable barrier, until he lifted the lock. He then made himself invisible and cast a Sonorus charm on himself and began making an announcement in the voice of Professor Dumbledore.

“This is Professor Dumbledore. This train is under attack from Death Eaters. I have placed a protection spell upon the train, which will prevent them from boarding it or casting spells through the sides. Everyone – without exception – is to stay in their compartment and lock the door. Under no circumstances should anyone leave the train.

Would a guard please Apparate immediately for reinforcements. Everyone is to stay calm.”

Rick made himself invisible and then Apparated to the corridor outside his original compartment. Pansy and Millicent were sitting there alone. Shutting his eyes and conjuring up a map of the train once more, Rick spotted Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini near the front of the train with someone named Matilda Martyn.

He Apparated to them immediately, and found the two Slytherins dragging a terrified little first-year girl, with brown plaits, along the corridor towards the carriage door.

Rick pointed his wand towards them. Focusing his mind on Draco and Blaise, he said “Stupefy.” The pair fell unconscious, to the floor, allowing their small captive to escape. The little girl ran back to her compartment, only to find the door locked from the inside. Rick flicked his wand at the door saying “Alohomora.” The little girl ran inside, shutting and locking the door behind her.

Rick did a quick scan of the train. No one else was out in the corridors. Right, time to deal with the Death Eaters, he thought, steeling himself for his first battle.

Still invisible, he Apparated outside. It was bright and sunny and he had no trouble spotting the Death Eaters. There were about twenty of them, all bunched together, flinging curses in the same direction.

Harry's compartment, thought Rick, I hope Dumbledore's protection is strong enough to block twenty combined Avada Kedavra Curses.

Rick waved his wand at the Death Eaters and boomed "Expelliarmus." He was using a hoarse ghostly accent for his spells. He didn't want anyone to recognise his voice.

The astonished Death Eaters flew through the air and landed in an unconscious heap. Their wands flew up into the air and then descended in a graceful arc towards Rick. Oops, he thought, Don't want to give myself away. Just before they reached him he waved his wand at them saying "Incendio" and they burst into flames. Rick then flicked his wand back over the pile of Death Eaters saying "Incarcerous". Each Death Eater was now bound from head to toe in thick ropes. Without their wands, they would be unable to Apparate away, even if they regained consciousness before reinforcements arrived from the Order to deal with them.

Rick Apparated back to the corridor outside Harry's compartment, to find Ron and Hermione flinging every curse and charm they knew at the door, in a frantic attempt to get it open. While they were absorbed, Rick made himself visible and simply walked up to the door, and, after focusing his mind on removing the Locking Charm he had placed upon it, turned the handle, and slid the door open. While Ron and Hermione were recovering from their surprise he entered the compartment, greatly relieved to find Harry very much alive.

"Where did you disappear to?" demanded Harry suspiciously. But before Rick could reply, Ron grabbed hold of Rick and shoved him down on a seat and pointed his wand at his chest.

"Just what did you do to that door you Slytherin creep?"

Rick feigned innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about, I just turned the handle, and it opened. Maybe one of you two unlocked it with your spells."

"Wait a minute," said Harry. "Did you say he unlocked the door? Because he was in here with me when the Death Eaters attacked and the next moment he was gone and the door was locked. I tried Alohomora, Evanesco, Incendio and even a couple of Blasting Curses, but nothing would move it. What kind of spell did you use to lock me in here?" he demanded of Rick.

"Look, I don't know what you are talking about, I didn't lock or unlock anything," lied Rick. But secretly he was very glad he did. Draco Malfoy was right. Harry would have been the first one off the train. He would have walked right into the Death Eaters' trap.

Ron turned on him again, as the train moved forward once more. "So what were you doing out and about while the Death Eaters were attacking then? Helping them perhaps? I heard a little first year girl was dragged out of her compartment by a couple of Slytherins, who said they were going to throw her to the Death Eaters. Luckily she got away from them. Maybe that was you and your mate Malfoy?"

Rick didn't know what to say, he couldn't tell them the truth, but if he said nothing he would remain suspect. "Look, I'm new here. I've never met a single person who is on this train before today. I wasn't helping any Death Eaters or Draco Malfoy. He's no friend of mine. It just happened, that him and his friends decided to sit in the same compartment as me."

"Rubbish," said Ron. "I know a slimy Slytherin git when I see one." Rick was starting to get annoyed. He stood up. Ron towered over him aggressively.

But Rick calmly stood his ground and said, "Why don't we let the Sorting Hat decide if I'm a Slytherin or not." With that he left the compartment sliding the door shut behind him.

Ron quickly checked that they hadn't been locked in again, before sitting down and looking at Harry. "So what did that git have to say for himself, when he was in here before?" Harry repeated what Rick had told him.

"Well I don't believe a word of it," said Ron. "If you ask me he's working for 'You-Know-Who', probably together with Malfoy. We better keep an eye on him."

"Yeah, I don't trust him either," said Harry. "But then I guess I don't trust anyone very much any more," he added despondently.

"There were about twenty Death Eaters just outside this window, all pointing their wands at me, screaming Death Curses. Whatever protection Dumbledore put on this train completely blocked them."

"Then suddenly the Death Eaters just flew up in the air as if they'd all been hit by a collective Expelliarmus Spell. It was weird, their wands all flew up in the air, and were converging on the same spot, when they just burst into flames. When I looked back to the Death Eaters they were all tied up. I wonder who was out there."

"Maybe it was a whole bunch of operatives from the Order under invisibility cloaks," suggested Ron. "Dumbledore instructed the guard to go for reinforcements, remember."

"It was obviously Dumbledore himself," said Hermione. "He made the announcement, so he must be on the train – or at least he was. He's probably the only wizard powerful enough to take on twenty Death Eaters and dispose of them all like that."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, it must have been him. I guess he was expecting trouble. Oh well, it looks like I've survived Voldemort's first attempt on my life for this year ... I wonder how many tries it will take till he finally succeeds."

"Oh please Harry, don't be so defeatist, it won't help," said Hermione with deep concern.

“Yeah come on mate, cheer up,” said Ron. “Anyone would feel down after spending the summer holidays with those miserable Muggles who call themselves your relatives. I just can’t understand why Dumbledore insisted on you staying there the whole holidays and only letting you come to the Burrow the last night. My mum is really angry with him about it.”

“I don’t understand either,” said Harry. “But I wouldn’t have wanted to spend the holidays at the Burrow and endanger all of your family. I wouldn’t have come, even if Dumbledore had allowed it. If Voldemort’s going to blow up the place where I’m living and kill everyone, I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be than with the Dursleys,” he said grimacing ironically.

“Oh Harry, don’t be so negative, and despairing,” said Hermione. “We’re going back to Hogwarts, where you will be safe under Dumbledore’s protection.”

“For how much longer? Two more years, and what then? Sooner or later I’m going to have to face Voldemort. It’s not Dumbledore that has to kill him, it’s me.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” asked Hermione. “What gives you that idea?”

“The prophecy,” replied Harry. “The one that Voldemort was after in the Department of Mysteries.”

“I don’t understand,” said Hermione. “The prophecy was lost when the ball smashed. No one knows what it said.”

“Ah, but they do,” said Harry, and he proceeded to tell them everything he had heard in the Headmaster’s office at the end of their fifth year, including the prophecy, which he repeated word for word. Ron and Hermione sat shocked. This was all new to them, even though they knew that Voldemort wanted to kill Harry.

“So in the end, it’s just me and Voldemort. I’m going to have to stand up to him alone. What really worries me, is that I have no idea how to defeat him.”

“No Harry,” said Hermione with iron in her voice. “It may be you he’s after, but you won’t be alone, Ron and I will be there with you – you know that don’t you?”

“Yeah mate,” affirmed Ron. “We’ll be with you, no matter what, you know you can count on us.”

“But I don’t want to count on you, I don’t want the pair of you with me, can’t you understand that! I don’t want to see you die. I’ve seen enough people die because of me. Cedric, Sirius ... it’s enough – don’t you understand?”

“The prophecy is about me and Voldemort, nobody else. It’s my destiny and I’m going to have to face it alone, no one else is going to die with me.” With that he shut his eyes and drew himself inwards, trying to cut himself off from his friends and from a world which he found increasingly hostile and threatening.

Hermione sighed, trying to force her mind away from Harry and his negativity. “How did that new wizard know about the Sorting Hat if he doesn’t know anything about the wizarding world?” asked Hermione after a few minutes thought.

Harry wasn’t listening, but Ron was all too eager to respond. “I don’t believe a word that slimy git said. Of course he’s lying through his teeth, but don’t worry, he won’t fool the Sorting Hat, it will see right through him and put him where he belongs ... in Slytherin.”

Hermione didn’t answer, she was looking for an explanation, because for some reason she could not understand, she wanted to believe Rick, even though there were some unanswered questions about doors getting locked and unlocked. “Someone he spoke with on the train could have told him about the Sorting Hat. He might even have read about it in a book.”

“What – like ‘Hogwarts a History’?” scoffed Ron. “Get off of it Hermione, no one reads that book – except for you.” A picture flashed through Ron’s mind of Rick and Hermione, as he had found them the

previous day, with eyes locked together, at Flourish and Blotts. She sure never looks at me that way, he thought jealously.

Harry was now asleep, snoring gently. "Hermione," said Ron softly in a more conciliatory tone. "Have you thought any more about what I asked you at the Burrow?"

Hermione blushed and looked quickly in Harry's direction to make sure that he was really asleep. She took out her wand and cast an Imperturbable Charm over their side of the compartment so that Harry couldn't hear them.

"Ron, I have thought about it, about you and me, umm ... you know, becoming closer, like girlfriend and boyfriend and I really don't think it's a good idea. I'm sorry Ron, I really love you as a friend, just like I love Harry, but I just think the friendship between the three of us is too important to risk."

"What are you saying Hermione, spell it out, which is it? You don't want to be my girlfriend because you don't feel that way about me, or you're worried that it would leave Harry out in the cold?"

Hermione pursed her lips, trying to find the right words. "I'm sorry Ron, but I think it's a bit of both really. I don't think I feel that way about you and I think that if we became a couple it would inevitably leave Harry all alone and I'm so worried about him right now, can't you see that he needs us, more now, than ever?"

"Well, he doesn't act like it sometimes. And you don't seem so sure that you don't feel that way about me. Maybe if we started getting, well you know, closer ... kissing and stuff," said Ron awkwardly, "you might discover that you do feel that way about me, so why can't we give it a try?"

"No Ron, it just wouldn't work out. You and Harry are like brothers to me, I don't want to spoil that, it's too precious. Now please, let's just leave it, and not talk about it any more."

"But Hermione, that doesn't make sense. If you have such strong feelings for me and Harry, then surely one of us should be your

boyfriend, not someone you hardly know like that git Krum, or someone else. We both know that Harry is not going to have any girlfriends any time soon. He would be too scared that they would become targets of 'You-Know-Who', or that they could be used to get at him. So Harry's out. That just leaves you and me."

"What makes you think I want a boyfriend?" asked Hermione, raising her eyebrows in disdain. "I'm not Lavender Brown or Parvati Patil – or one of those silly witches who can think and talk about nothing but wizards from morning to night. I have two more years of serious studies ahead of me, plus there's Harry and the battle against the Dark side to worry about. I just don't have time for a boyfriend, and I don't feel ready for one right now, either."

"Well I'm ready – I mean for a girlfriend, that is. Fred and George had lots of girlfriends when they were at Hogwarts. In fact I think they may have shared them sometimes without letting the witches know – perks of being a twin. Why even my little sister Ginny is onto her second boyfriend. First it was Michael Corner and now it's Dean Thomas. Not that I'm happy about it."

"Look Ron, if you think you need a girlfriend, I'm sure there are plenty of witches at Hogwarts who would be delighted to oblige you, but I'm not one of them. So will you please just drop it." With that she flicked her wand, muttering, "Finite Incantatum," to remove the Imperturbable Charm and make it clear to Ron that the conversation was over.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for the remainder of the journey.
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Chapter 3 - Sorted, Settled and Shaped

Standing in the Great Hall, behind the first-years, Rick looked about in awe and wonder. Despite all his reading and everything he had learned about Hogwarts, to actually stand there, in the Great Hall under the enchanted ceiling was a rapturous experience. The magic was all around him. He felt it flowing through him like a gentle current, his whole being resonated with it. It was as if he had become aware of some other dimension, one that had been there all along, but which he had never noticed.

“Zarina Zabini,” said the Deputy Headmistress, calling the last of the first-years to be sorted.

“Slytherin,” the Sorting Hat decided almost immediately it touched her head.

“Rick Godfry,” said Professor McGonagall. Then turning to the hall, by way of explanation she said, “Mr. Godfry is joining us as a sixth year student. He has not attended a school of magic before as there are none in the remote part of New Zealand where he lives. I trust that his classmates and housemates will assist him in adjusting to Hogwarts.”

Rick sat down on the stool. It was a little small for a sixteen year-old. As soon as the Sorting Hat was placed on his head it started muttering in astonishment.

“My goodness gracious me, who in heaven can you be?”

“Now how am I supposed to sort this lot into a single house? Why there are witches and wizards here who have been in each of the four Hogwarts houses, how can I sort them all correctly? Why we even have three of the Founders who created me here, surely I must sort each one into their own house.... oh what ever shall I do?”

Rick knew that no one but himself could hear the confused ramblings of the Sorting Hat, but people were starting to become curious at the length of time it was taking.

He directed a thought at the hat "Please sort me into Gryffindor, that is what all these witches and wizards would like you to do, surly you can sense that."

"Yes, you are right, I can feel it now. However this is most irregular, most irregular.... I've never encountered anything like this in the thousand years that I have been sorting Hogwarts students."

Finally, it yelled out for all to hear, "Gryffindor!"

Rick got up in relief and found a seat at the top of the Gryffindor table amongst the first-year students. He found himself sitting next to the little girl with the brown plaits whom he had rescued from Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini on the train.

"Hello," she smiled at him, "I'm Matilda Martyn, pleased to meet you."

Rick took the small hand she extended in his, and replied gallantly, "Rick Godfry, the pleasure is all mine." Matilda giggled and turned red and Rick realised that he had better tone down the charm before he started attracting attention.

Glancing down along the Gryffindor table he saw Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil giggling and staring at him admiringly. He quickly shifted his gaze, only to find his eyes locked with those of Ron Weasley, who was glaring at him with anything but admiration. He didn't need his Legilimency skills to read Ron's thoughts. He was making no secret of the fact that he thought Rick had used some kind of Dark magic to con the Sorting Hat and infiltrate his way into Gryffindor. In fact those were almost exactly the words he was saying to Harry and Hermione at that moment.

"Don't be silly Ron," said Hermione, "the Sorting Hat knows its job, and it's been doing it for a thousand years now; no one can fool it. Why, it was created by the Hogwarts Founders themselves! Do you think a sixteen year old wizard is any match for their magic?"

But Ron wasn't going to allow himself to be convinced by mere logic. "Just remember that one of those Founders was Salazar Slytherin," he said darkly.

Harry interrupted their argument by pointing to a young witch with long blonde hair, sitting at the teachers' table between the Arithmacy teacher Professor Vector and Professor Snape, who seemed to be ignoring her. "Who do you think she is?" asked Harry. "She looks somehow familiar, but I can't think where I've seen her before. She sure is beautiful though," he added.

"Well, obviously she must be the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher," said Hermione. "All the teachers from last year, except for that unbearable Umbridge, are here. Even Trelawney's back. But you're right, she does look familiar, I know I've seen that face before, somewhere...."

She was interrupted by Professor Dumbledore who rose to welcome the students to Hogwarts. Hermione was right of course. The mysterious newcomer was the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, but the three friends got a surprise when Dumbledore revealed her to be "Nymphadora Tonks."

"Wow," exclaimed Harry, "can you believe that that's Tonks?"

"Well of course," said Hermione, trying to cover up her embarrassment at missing the obvious. "She's a Metamorphmagus after all. She's just changed her hair and nose to look a bit more, umm respectable. I mean she's a Professor now, so she has to look the part. Professor Dumbledore has probably asked her not to keep changing her appearance. Just imagine how confusing that would be for all the students."

"Do you think that's what she really looks like?" asked Ron. "I wonder why she doesn't make herself look like that, all the time, she's really beautiful you know."

"Yeah," said Harry, also staring at Tonks with his mouth open.

"I imagine it's so she doesn't have hoards of teenage boys gawping at her constantly," said Hermione sharply. But that was the end of the conversation, because Dumbledore had just uttered that magical words, so beloved by generations of Hogwarts students "Tuck in,"

and Ron and Harry had more important matters on their minds ... food.

Rick, meanwhile was fielding questions from Matilda and the other Gryffindor first-years, with whom he was sitting; about New Zealand and the magical creatures that lived there, high up in the Alps. The only one he had come across during his 'speed read' at Flourish and Blotts was the Antipodean Opaleye dragon. So he obliged their curiosity with a few of his own: The Monstrous Mountain Troll, the Flesheating Fiordland Flobberworm, the Abhorrent Alpine Acromantuala and the Giant Glacial Goblin. He only hoped that none of them asked Hagrid for more information about any of them.

When the meal was over, the Headmaster despatched them to their dormitories. It was time for Ginny Weasley and Colin Creevey to undertake their first duties as Gryffindor prefects. "First years follow us please," said Colin. "We will show you the way to Gryffindor Tower." Ginny smiled at Rick saying, "You can come with us too, if you like." Rick smiled back at Ginny, she was really rather attractive, with her mane of vivid red hair and warm brown eyes.

Wow, thought Rick, I didn't think Ginny would be so pretty. But then he had another thought which he found a little disturbing. If Dumbledore was right, that he had in a sense created this whole world himself, to be born – well not born in his case but sent – into, then he was responsible in a way, for how people were, how they acted and what they looked like. Ginny was pretty and Hermione was ... beautiful, because that's how they had been in his mind ... I better be happy in this world, he thought to himself, because if I'm not, I've really got no one, but myself, to blame.

"Coming?" called Ginny for the third time, breaking Rick's reverie. "Oh, sorry," said Rick, realising that he had been staring at her all the while, and from the look on her face he had been pouring on the charm. As he jumped to his feet he saw that their exchange had not gone unnoticed. Her brother Ron was giving him a death glare. Rick groaned inwardly as he followed Ginny out of the Great Hall. Oh what I have I done now?

Ginny, meanwhile was making no attempt to catch up with Colin and the first-years, but seemed too overcome by Rick's unintended charm to say anything to him. Rick asked her some questions about her background and family, willing her to relax. He knew the answers of course, but feigned ignorance. After a while Ginny loosened up a bit and started talking about her parents and many brothers. Her father had left the Ministry, she said, but did not elaborate on what he was doing now, though Rick guessed that he was probably working full time for the Order. She had mentioned Percy in passing, but had said nothing further about him. Rick was curious and asked Ginny what Percy was doing.

"Percy has parted ways with the rest of the family," she said, her face becoming red with anger. "He's become the perfect 'Yes Wizard' for Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic. Fudge has appointed him as Minister of Internal Security and he's also Fudge's deputy. We don't mention his name in the Weasley family anymore, he's a disgrace," she finished with an expression of unmitigated disgust on her face.

Rick tried to draw Ginny out further with an innocent comment about how well Percy had done for someone so recently out of school, but she said that just thinking about Percy upset her too much, and she became silent once more. Well, thought Rick, it looks like mentioning Percy is the perfect antidote to 'too much charm' where Ginny Weasley is concerned.

Rick took the opportunity to take in the ancient corridors, bedecked with moving pictures, statues, suits of armour and various enchanted objects. The magic of it all was quite overwhelming. He sensed the trick stairs, even before Ginny pointed them out. It was as if he had walked these corridors many times before ... which in a sense, he had, or at least the spirits with whom he was connected, had.

"Snidget," said Ginny at the portrait of the Fat Lady. It swung open and she led Rick into the Gryffindor common room, to join the first-years who were sitting together nervously and looking around in awe at the grandeur. Colin proceeded to give them the standard firsties orientation speech, and then handed them their class timetables. He then led the boys up to their dormitory while Ginny took the girls.

By now, the older students were coming into the common room, talking noisily about their holidays and prospects for the upcoming Quidditch season. Rick spotted Neville Longbottom all alone and walked over to introduce himself. Neville didn't seem to be so shy anymore. The events of his fifth year had clearly matured him. He began talking animatedly about his summer project of growing Mandrake seedlings at his grandmother's house for Professor Sprout, who had provided the seeds.

"Aren't Mandrakes dangerous?" asked Rick.

"Well yes, but not at the seedling stage, all you have to worry about is Dugbogs. But I learned a Dugbog-repelling spell which worked a treat. I wonder why Professor Sprout needs so many Mandrakes this year. They're mainly used to make restorative drafts for people who have been transfigured or cursed you know."

"It sounds like Hogwarts is expecting trouble," remarked Rick, sagely.

Neville's eyes widened as he took in the import of Rick's comment. It made him feel a little nervous, but also proud that he had been able to do something helpful, over the holidays.

"Would you like me to show you up to the sixth year boys' dormitory?" asked Neville, thinking that it was going to be a little cramped with six beds now.

Of course it was the same dormitory they had slept in since their first year, but when he opened the door, Neville noticed that it had magically expanded, so there was plenty of space. "That must be your bed," said Neville, pointing to the one closest to the door, spotting the unfamiliar trunk.

"Thanks," said Rick, as Neville turned to descend back down to the common room.

Rick kicked off his shoes and lay down on his four poster bed, closing his eyes and trying to take stock of everything that had happened to him over the past two days. It just seemed incredible that he was really here at Hogwarts, just as he had dreamed so often in his

previous life. For the moment he was not worrying about Voldemort and whatever trials lay ahead, but simply enjoying the magic of the moment. His peace however, was soon broken by the sound of an angry Ron Weasley.

“And just what do you think you’re doing in our dorm?” challenged Ron. Rick decided that it was time to take the ‘bull by the horns’ and try to sort things out with Ron.

“I’m in this dormitory, because I’m a sixth year Gryffindor, the same as you,” said Rick, sitting up and facing Ron and Harry. “I’ll be sleeping in the same dormitory as you, eating at the same table, attending the same classes, sitting in the same common room. Life will be much more pleasant for us both – and everyone else – if you would just give me a chance, instead of condemning me from the outset just because some Slytherins chose to sit in the same compartment as me on the train. Do you know what that’s called? It’s called prejudice. You know nothing about me and yet you’ve already made up your mind that I’m the enemy.”

Ron just stood there wordless, but Harry was moved by Rick’s words and walked up and shook his hand. “Welcome to Gryffindor, Rick, I’m prepared to keep an open mind and give you a chance, although I’m still not sure what you were up to on the train.”

“Come on Ron, let’s leave prejudice to Malfoy and the Slytherin bigots, we don’t need it in Gryffindor,” he added, turning to Ron.

But Ron looked unconvinced and just walked away to his bed saying over his shoulder, “And you’ll stay away from my sister if you know what’s good for you.”

Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan came in shortly afterwards and introduced themselves to Rick in a friendly manner. Well, thought Rick, four out of five isn’t too bad. He guessed that Dumbledore had instructed that the new bed be placed by the door. That put him next to Harry, who had Ron on his other side along the same wall. Rick would be able to keep an eye on Harry if he started sneaking out at night.

When Rick arrived in the Great Hall for breakfast the following morning, he found a seat opposite Harry, Hermione and Ron. Harry and Hermione smiled at him and returned his friendly greetings, but Ron just ignored him, continuing to stuff sausage in his mouth. Well, thought Rick, being ignored is an improvement at least. "What subjects are you taking?" asked Hermione. Rick dug out his timetable and showed it to her.

"Oh, you're doing Potions, I see, we've got double Potions straight after breakfast," she said dejectedly. How interesting, you seem to have exactly the same subjects as Harry."

"I hope you brought your cauldron and Potions ingredients with you," said Harry, "We have to be down in the Snape's dungeon in ten minutes and you won't have time to go back to Gryffindor Tower to get them."

"Oops," said Rick, "Guess I'll have to be quick about it."

"Yes," said Hermione, "Snape hates all Gryffindors and will take off house points, or give you a detention if you're late."

But Rick didn't seem concerned and proceeded to enjoy a leisurely breakfast. Hermione disappeared behind a book and Ron and Harry started speculating on who would fill the vacancies on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

As the three rose to leave, Hermione looked at Rick with concern, "Oh dear, I warned you about being late for Potions, you're for it now," however Rick just shrugged and followed them out.

After leaving the great Hall he ducked into an alcove and summoned his Potions things. He decided not to use the summoning charm Accio as, it would take too long, and it might be dangerous having heavy objects flying at speed through the castle. He just sort of Disapparated them from his dormitory and Apparated them to the alcove... Easy!

Then he visualised a 'Marauders Map' in his mind, located the Potions dungeon, spotted an empty room nearby and Apparated to it. He entered the dungeon and took a seat.

He noticed Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode sitting together. Pansy gave Rick a coquettish smile, batting her eyelids at him. Draco scowled at him and the other two Slytherins ignored him.

Dean Thomas came in and sat next to Rick. Then, came Harry and Hermione, who, noting his cauldron, asked in astonishment, "How on earth did you manage to get your things and get down here so fast?"

Rick grinned at her cheekily and said, "Apparated, how else?"

"Don't be ridiculous," scoffed Hermione. "It states quite unequivocally in 'Hogwarts, a History' that it is impossible to Apparate into, out of, or anywhere within this castle, or the surrounding grounds."

"Oh, but you see, I didn't know that," said Rick with an innocent grin, as if it explained everything.

"He's just pulling your leg Hermione," laughed Harry, "I'll bet he had his Potions things with him all along."

But Hermione wasn't going to let it go so easily. "But he left the Great Hall after us, and got here before us!"

"Yeah, but I didn't know the way, I got lost and must have taken a shortcut by mistake," said Rick.

Hermione looked far from satisfied, but at that moment Professor Snape appeared and all talking immediately died as if so commanded, by his brooding presence.

"You will notice that our Potions class is smaller this year," he began in his silky, insinuating voice. "Only those with a satisfactory OWL result are allowed to proceed to sixth year Potions and beyond. It's no mystery, of course, why incompetents like Longbottom and most of

his fellow Gryffindors are no longer with us,” he sneered, much to the delight of the Slytherins.

Then turning on Harry, he continued, “But a far greater mystery is how you Potter, managed to make the grade ... or perhaps some ‘special treatment’ for Hogwarts’s ‘Special Hero’ was involved?”

“That’s impossible, and you know it,” Hermione blurted out angrily. “OWL and NEWT examinations are conducted by a totally independent qualifications authority – which is the reason why Harry received a fair Potions mark – for once.”

Snape was furious, but all he could do was spit out, “Ten points from Gryffindor for your unsolicited opinions Miss Granger,” because Hermione was right on both counts, and everyone knew it.

Next Snape turned on Rick. “And as for you Godfrey, let me place it clearly on the record that I have only accepted you into this class at the express request of the Headmaster. I have no idea how he expects someone like you, with no Wizarding background, experience, or prior tuition to speak of, to be able take up magical studies of such an advanced level. I have made it clear to the Headmaster and other teaching staff, that I consider it highly inappropriate, and that your proper place is with the first year students – if indeed you should be at Hogwarts at all.”

Rick just sat there coolly, letting it all flow past. He was using the opportunity to probe Snape’s mind. He was determined to find out which side the Potions master was really on. Rick had to admit a grudging admiration for Snape’s Occlumency skills, it took a great deal of probing to penetrate his defences, but then again, he certainly had to be an expert, having to hide his true thoughts from Dumbledore or Voldemort ... or both.

Luckily, for Rick, Snape was enjoying himself so much – after all, it was his first opportunity at Gryffindor-bashing for almost three months – that he didn’t notice Rick’s intrusion.

Rick felt relieved, there was no doubt at all that Dumbledore was right in trusting Snape’s loyalty. Rick now knew who had ‘leaked’ the

Prophecy to Voldemort. Snape was invaluable as a spy to Dumbledore, but yuck ... Snape's mind was not a pretty place to visit.

"I have made it very clear to the Headmaster," concluded Snape, "that if you fail to perform to my satisfaction, you will be out of this class in a trice, and that goes for the rest of you," he said turning to Harry and the other Gryffindors.

"I have been doing my best to catch up by reading all the course materials for the past five years, sir," said Rick earnestly.

"Potions ability is not just something you can get out of a book," scoffed Snape, glaring meaningfully at Hermione. "It requires a certain disposition and an empathy for the subtle art of alchemy."

"But let us see what you have learnt, Mr. Godfry. What is Polyjuice Potion and how would you make it?"

"But that's unfair sir," protested Hermione. "It's not covered in the Hogwarts syllabus, and the only book in the library with that information is in the Restricted — ouch!" Harry had stomped on her foot and she stopped abruptly when she realised what she was saying.

"Yes Miss Granger, you were saying?"

But Rick quickly interrupted, "Polyjuice Potion is used to adopt the form of another person. It is made from lacewing flies, which must be stewed for 21 days; leeches; powdered bicorn horn; knotgrass; fluxweed, that has been picked during the full moon; and boomslang skin. You need to mix in a sample, such as hair, from the person whose form you wish to assume. It lasts for about an hour."

Snape turned on Rick. "And which Professor gave you permission to visit the Restricted Section Mr. Godfry?"

"Err, no one sir, I think I must have read about it while I was looking through the Potions section in Flourish and Blotts."

But Snape wasn't finished with Rick, he started asking him a series of Potions question which became increasingly more difficult. The answers to some of them could only be found in obscure texts. Rick of course, had no difficulty finding the answers, because, after all, they were right there in Snape's mind – ready for the taking.

Snape was getting increasingly frustrated at his inability to find a question that Rick couldn't answer. But he was also getting suspicious at how he could know so much, and began to wonder if Rick could possibly possess Legilimency abilities.

So he set a trap. He asked him a question about a potion that he had recently developed himself and had not yet published in any of the Apothecary journals. Unfortunately for him, Rick clearly saw what he was doing and simply said, "I have no idea sir, I've read nothing at all about that potion."

Hermione meanwhile was aghast – no outraged – even she didn't know the answers to some of the questions which Rick answered with ease. How could he – how dare he know so much! There was definitely something very strange about Rick and she was not going to rest until she got to the bottom of it.

Snape was wise enough to know when he was beat and left Rick alone after that, confining his sadistic "sport" to Harry and Dean. It was also too difficult to find that know-it-all Granger wanting, when it came to Potions knowledge. He was starting to miss Neville Longbottom, sixth form was not going to be much fun at all.

With each new subject they shared, Hermione noticed that Rick's skill and knowledge very quickly matched her own. She was facing the terrible prospect, that for the first year since she had been at Hogwarts, that she might not finish top in all of her classes. At least Rick wasn't taking Arithmacy, Ancient Runes and Muggles Studies, so she was safe in those three, at least.

She felt a growing sense of rivalry with Rick. For the first time she could remember, either at Hogwarts, or her Muggle school before that,

there was someone who could match her intelligence. Although Rick didn't appear to be trying to compete with her at all.

He was just naturally good at everything he did, it was just so annoying. He always handed in his assignments, often his parchments were as long as hers, yet she hardly ever saw him studying or doing homework. In fact he was often absent from the common room of an evening and he wasn't in the library either. Hermione had no idea where he got to. She couldn't figure him out, and she was finding it very frustrating.

Rick got along well with everyone in Gryffindor. He seemed to like everyone and everyone liked him. Although he was always very low key and never at the centre of things. In fact he was quite self-effacing and seemed to be trying to avoid attracting attention.

Those efforts were totally wasted in the case of Lavender and Parvati who just could not stay away from him. They were like bees around a honey pot whenever he was in the Gryffindor common room, draping themselves decoratively over the arms of any chair that Rick sat in, batting their eyelids at him endlessly.

Hermione found their behaviour utterly nauseating. In fact there were quite a few girls in Gryffindor and the other houses too, from first years up, who seemed to have developed a crush on Rick. Even Professors McGonagall and Sprout seemed to have a soft spot for him and Tonks was as bad as some of the younger girls.

But Rick's popularity in Gryffindor was not quite universal. Ron Weasley was nothing if not stubborn. He took his prejudices seriously and didn't change them easily. Rick never tried to intrude upon the 'Dream Team', although he was sometimes the subject of their private conversations.

Ron was convinced that if he was not working for You Know Who himself, Rick was certainly a closet Slytherin, spying for Malfoy and Co. Harry found himself liking Rick – it was hard not to. But like Hermione, he had noticed how good Rick was at everything, and in particular how powerful he was when it came to magic in classes like Transfiguration, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry didn't share Ron's prejudice concerning Rick, but he agreed with Hermione that there was something peculiar about him and it worried him. If Rick did turn out to be hostile, he would be a very dangerous adversary.

Please review ...

Chapter 4 - Slytherins and Skulduggery

Rick's first few weeks at Hogwarts passed relatively uneventfully. He easily caught up with his studies and, thanks to the gifts of Rowena Ravenclaw and others, his homework took him hardly any time at all. That left him with plenty of time for intelligence gathering. He kept close tabs on Harry, using his Legilimency abilities frequently. If Harry was planning to sneak off somewhere or get lured into danger he wanted to know about it.

As Hermione had noticed, Rick was frequently absent from the Gryffindor common room of an evening. He was most likely in a common room – just not his own. His most frequent 'visits' were to the Slytherin dungeon. Rick was learning how to use more of his gifts.

One of the most useful, was the ability to Disapparate, without having to immediately Apparatesomewhere else. It was like his body was nowhere at all, but his mind and senses were wherever he wanted them to be. It was much better than just being invisible, because no one could trip over him, hear him, or smell him.

He spent quite a lot of time in the Slytherin sixth year boys' dormitory. Most of it was listening to Draco Malfoy's boring, arrogant drivel. But occasionally he gleaned some useful information. His Legilimency skills were of more use to him than his ears, because Draco didn't reveal much. He just made snide, knowing remarks about Harry Potter, Dumbledore and all 'those Mudblood and Muggle lovers', insinuating darkly to Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott that they would very soon be getting what they deserved.

Rick discovered that Draco himself wasn't actually privy to the details of what the Death Eaters were planning. However, it was clear that there was to be an attack of some sort on Harry soon, and that Draco would be involved. He was awaiting instructions and a weapon or some other object from his father. There was also a plan to remove Dumbledore as Headmaster.

Whenever Rick had some useful information to report, he would Apparate directly to the Headmaster's office.

Professor Dumbledore was most appreciative of the intelligence that Rick was able to provide, and always had a welcoming pot of tea with scones and jam and clotted cream to offer him. He was also helping Rick to understand some of the powers he had received, and from time to time would remind him of the heavy responsibility he bore.

“The temptation to abuse your powers should not be underestimated,” he warned Rick very seriously, one evening. “Please remember that for all those powers, you are still human, with all the human frailties. The teenage years can be especially ‘difficult’ ones. You are still a teenage boy, with the powerful hormones and strong desires that go with it,” he added, engaging Rick with a very direct gaze.

Rick was getting more embarrassed by the minute and worried about where this conversation might be leading. He had to fight the strong urge to immediately Disapparate out of Dumbledore’s office. But the Headmaster ploughed on, despite Rick’s obvious discomfort.

“You must be very careful not to abuse your powers, to satisfy what are, after all, the perfectly normal interests of a boy of your age.” Rick gulped.

“Now I’m not suggesting that you should have nothing at all to do with girls. Only that if you are ... hmm, pursuing such ‘interests’, that you should be very careful not to employ your special gifts, particularly your charm.” Rick’s face was glowing red by now.

“I’m also sure you will understand that you should be careful in your ‘undercover’ work, not to put yourself in ‘inappropriate’ places and situations,” he concluded. Rick quickly nodded in agreement, then mumbled something about homework and with a hurried “thank you” for the refreshments, he Disapparated out of Dumbledore’s office as fast as he could.

Rick had often thought about exactly those subjects, but it was one thing for him to think about it, and quite another to have the Headmaster talking to him about it. He was being careful with his charm, especially around Hermione, because his feelings for her were growing stronger. He had actually made up some rules of

conduct; although there was no way he was going to discuss them with the Headmaster.

Rule 1 was not to use charm on witches unless it is strategically necessary in the fight against the Dark. He continued to use his charm on Pansy Parkinson, because she was close to Draco and might be helpful – and he certainly didn't have any romantic interest in Pansy, so that was safe.

Rule 2 was not to use Legilimency to find out how Hermione felt about him. Although he probed the minds of Hermione and Ron from time to time in areas relating to Harry and any collective plans of the trio, he was experienced enough now to be able to identify different areas of the mind and only go where he needed to. It was like arriving at a crossroads and choosing which road to follow. He had so far managed to stay away from Hermione's emotions, although he was dying to know if she had feelings for him, and also how she felt about Ron. He didn't need his special skills to know that Ron fancied Hermione. Ron was a bit obvious.

Rule 3: Stay out of the girls' dormitories and bathrooms. Well, he did sometimes visit the dormitories of the senior Slytherin girls, but exited fast if they looked like they might be about to take off their clothes. The Slytherin girls weren't really much of a temptation anyway.

Defence Against the Dark Arts with Tonks had become the Gryffindors' favourite class. Unfortunately they had it together with the Slytherins. Sure, Tonks was clumsy and managed to fall over something or someone or herself, at least once or twice a lesson, but she really knew her stuff, and her classes were always fun. She enjoyed teaching them and they enjoyed learning. What a contrast to Potions!

Not to mention that her current appearance – whether it was really 'her' or not, was very much admired by all the boys. When she demonstrated new moves in front of the class, she always had their undivided attention.

Rick had to be careful, and remember not to do everything perfectly the first time. Tonks was amazed at his abilities and to deflect suspicion he said that he'd received personal tuition before coming to Hogwarts from a very skilled wizard, and so already knew a lot of the spells.

Rick was always a bit nervous when they paired up for practice and Harry was with Draco. He kept a close 'watch' on Draco's intentions. Today, they were studying the Shield Charm. They were working in pairs. One person would cast the Shield Charm saying *Protego*, while the other threw a hex at them, which would be blocked if their shield was strong enough. After each person had taken a turn at casting the Shield Charm, they would change partners.

Rick was being careful, using weak hexes so as only to penetrate imperfect shields. Like everything else, Hermione was very good at Defence Against the Dark Arts, although it was the one subject where Harry excelled her, at least in the practical part.

Hermione cast her shield with a confident "*Protego*." It was very strong and she looked smugly at Rick as if to say, "Let's see you break through that." Rick couldn't resist the challenge. "*Rictusempra*," he said and sent a Tickling Charm right through the shield. Hermione was furious, but she couldn't stop laughing; and the more she laughed, the more furious she became. "*Finite Incantatum*," said Rick finally, hoping she was not too angry with him.

Fortunately it was time to change partners, and before Hermione could say anything, Draco Malfoy stepped up to her, saying smugly, "This should be easy, go on, let's see you try to cast a shield Granger." Hermione immediately cast her shield with a firm "*Protego*." Draco began hurling hexes at it for all he was worth. But he couldn't get through, no matter how hard he tried.

"I don't know how you managed that Granger," said Draco, clearly miffed. "Either sheer luck, or else you spent the whole holidays practicing and swotting up on Shield Charms." But it's my turn now; I'll show you how it's done. Come on, let's see you try to even dent my shield," he said arrogantly.

Rick was now partnered with Harry and since they were standing near to Draco and Hermione, he was probing Draco's mind just to make sure he wasn't planning anything unexpected.

He was - Rick caught it just in time. Instead of casting the Shield Charm, he flung a Furnunculus Curse at Hermione who had dropped her shield, leaving her totally unprotected.

"Take that Mudbood," he spat. Hermione was caught completely off-guard, as she had been looking towards Rick and Harry, wondering if Rick would be able to break Harry's shield.

Rick flicked his left hand in Hermione's direction casting a Reflecting Shield in front of her. It was something he had recently learned. It deflected the curse back upon its caster, but with double its original potency.

Draco's face began erupting in huge ugly boils. He had no idea what had happened. Tonks asked Pansy to take him to Madam Pomfrey immediately. Then turning angrily to the class she demanded, "Who cast the Furnunculus Curse?"

"It was Malfoy – he cast it himself," said Harry. "I heard him clearly, and saw him. Instead of casting his Shield Charm when it was his turn, he threw a Furnunculus Curse at Hermione. But just before it reached her, it bounced back and hit him square in the face. Maybe Hermione's Shield Charm was still active or something."

"Shield Charms don't send back curses like that" said Tonks thoughtfully, "I can't understand it."

But Hermione could. Well she didn't actually know what Rick had done or how he had done it. He hadn't even used his wand, which had been in his right hand. But she had seen him flick his left hand in her direction, and was certain that he was responsible for whatever it was that had protected her – and sent Malfoy's curse back into his smug face. She was thankful to him, but her suspicions about him were increased even more. First he had penetrated her perfect Shield, and now this, an unknown spell, cast without a wand.

But for once in her life Hermione kept quiet. She decided not to reveal to the class what she had witnessed. She was sure now, that Rick was hiding something significant, and she was more determined than ever to find out what it was.

When she told Harry and Ron about what she had observed in Defence Against the Dark Arts, their reactions were different. Harry was slowly becoming convinced that Rick really was on their side. He had saved Hermione from a dreadful curse which he had turned back upon Malfoy. But the incident only strengthened his opinion that with all his unexplained power Rick would be dangerous indeed, if he turned out to be their enemy. "I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt for now," said Harry. "But we should keep a close watch on him, until we are completely certain where his loyalties lie."

Hermione agreed with Harry, but Ron was still unwilling to consider Rick anything but an enemy. "Look," said Ron reasonably, "How do we know that it wasn't all an act, to get us to trust him, and then once our defences are down, he moves in for the kill?"

"Godfrey must have known what Malfoy was planning – no one could have thrown up a shield or whatever it was that fast. So his poor little ferret friend has to spend a few days in the hospital wing, gorging himself on lollies and sweets from endless 'Comfort Packs' from mummy dear, while he gets a holiday from schoolwork – big sacrifice that – I could handle it."

The following Monday morning was double Potions with Snape – what a way to begin the week. Draco, looking fully recovered from the Furnunculus Curse, was sitting with Pansy. Rick partnered Dean Thomas and Harry and Hermione were together as usual. Rick noticed that Draco and Pansy, who usually sat as far away from the Gryffindors as possible were at the other end of the Slytherin bench today, near to Harry and Hermione.

"Today you will be making the Folliculus Rerverus Potion," began Snape. It was immediately obvious to him that the insufferable, know-

it-all Granger, knew all about the potion and could barely wait for him to ask for someone to tell the class about it.

Her hand, he imagined, was primed to shoot up as soon as he asked. Humph, desperate as usual, to dazzle us with her knowledge, he thought with disgust. So, instead of asking, he continued immediately on, noting with satisfaction, the look of disappointment on her face.

"It is closely related to the Polyjuice Potion, but is simple enough to be brewed in around an hour. Note, that I did not say that it was simple enough for everyone in this class to brew successfully," he added with a smirk.

He then waved his wand at the blackboard upon which the list of ingredients and the method of preparation appeared in his loopy script. The last item on the list of ingredients was three hairs from each person brewing the potion.

"One person from each pair, go over to the bench," he said, "and take your ingredients." When they had returned to their places, Snape continued. "Correctly brewed, the Folliculus Rerverus Potion exchanges the hair of the two people who brew it. The effect lasts for approximately 24 hours." There were some muffled giggles from the students as they each looked at their partner's hair and then at that of the other pairs.

"Only one pair will be asked to sample their concoction today, in order to demonstrate how this potion works," he said. "Madam Pomfrey would never forgive me if I were to fill up the hospital wing with a whole class of re-arranged students," he added with a smirk.

"Be very careful to add each of the ingredients at the proper moment, and then make exactly the requited number of turns in the correct direction. If you do not, or if you should fail to grind the boomslang skin to exactly the correct consistency, your potion could have very unexpected effects.... For example, instead of exchanging the hair on your head, it could exchange ... well, almost any parts of your body at all." Snape was obviously enjoying himself and finding it hard to conceal a sadistic smile.

Everyone guessed who would be sampling the potion, and Snape did not disappoint them. "Potter and Granger, you will be demonstrating the effects of this potion. I do hope that you have been paying careful attention to me, because otherwise Gryffindor house might have to get used to two new students, 'Herry Grotter' and Harrmione Panger'. They might have some difficulty deciding which dormitories to put you in," he added with unconcealed glee.

The Slytherins were laughing with delight at the horror on the faces of Harry and Hermione. "Get started," ordered Snape. Harry decided to allow Hermione to do everything, as she was much better at Potions than him. However he was watching her very carefully and double-checking everything she did against the instructions on the blackboard.

Just as they were in the final stages of preparing their potions, an agonised scream came from the far end of the Slytherin bench where Theodore Nott was working with Blaise Zabini. Their cauldron had tipped over drenching Nott, who was screaming in pain.

"Stop that terrible squealing Nott," yelled Snape. "If you have been following my instructions correctly, your potion should be barely above blood temperature at this stage. The potion, whether brewed correctly or not has no effect when applied externally, save perhaps for some minor skin irritation.

Get to your dormitory Nott, and get yourself cleaned up. If you feel unwell, then go to Madam Pomfrey. You, Zabini, can clean up that terrible mess."

Several minutes later, Snape handed Harry and Hermione each a goblet. "The moment of truth," he announced, with a malicious grin. "Fill these completely to the top and then drink the entire contents. "This promises to be most interesting."

Rick began to feel uneasy, as if some sixth sense was warning him that something bad was about to happen. It wasn't because they might have made a mistake with the potion, it was something far worse, Rick was sure of it. He probed Snape's mind. No, nothing

there but sadistic anticipation, that James Potter's brat and his insufferable know-it-all friend, could be in for a very unpleasant and embarrassing time.

He turned his attention to Draco. Yes, there it was – Harry and Hermione were just minutes away from an agonising death. While everyone's attention was on the diversion that Blaise had created by deliberately upsetting his cauldron over Nott, Draco had tipped a deadly poison into Harry and Hermione's cauldron.

Draco's mind was seething with anticipation, imagining the praise of the Dark Lord and the rewards that his father had said were sure to be heaped upon him, as the one who had killed Harry Potter, his master's great nemesis. Plus he was getting rid of the Mudblood too – an unexpected bonus.

As Harry and Hermione nervously raised their goblets to their lips, Rick jumped up and yelled out. "No, don't drink it!"

Snape strode over to Rick, fuming and towering over him, he said menacingly, "As I recall Mr. Godfry, I am the Hogwarts Potions master, not you. I am the one in authority here, not you. I am the one whom the students in the Potions dungeon have to obey, not you. Twenty points from Gryffindor, now sit down and remain silent."

"Potter and Granger, drink the contents of those goblets right now, or you will lose Gryffindor another ten points each."

But Rick did not sit, he stood his ground. "No," he yelled frantically pushing past Snape, "Don't touch it, it's poison!"

Snape was now livid. "How dare you disobey me Godfry. Another thirty points from Gryffindor and you are to leave this dungeon now! I want you back here at eight o'clock tonight and for the following six nights. You will be serving detention with me and learning obedience ... something which apparently you did not come across in your copious reading."

"I'm not going anywhere," said Rick with a tone of steel in his voice, that was starting to unsettle Snape. "Draco Malfoy put poison in Harry

and Hermione's cauldron, when Zabini distracted everyone by upsetting his caldron over Nott. If they drink it they will die."

Snape still didn't believe Rick. He still thought that he was just trying to save his fellow Gryffindors from the consequences of their own badly brewed potion. But there was a note of authority in Rick's voice, which he seemed unable to ignore. It created just the slightest doubt in his mind. Certainly he disliked Potter and Granger, but he didn't want to see any real harm come to either of them.

"Prove it," said Snape. Rick thought for a moment, how was he going to do this?

"All right," he said to Snape. "Why don't you ask Draco Malfoy to drink a goblet from their cauldron. The Folliculus Rerverus Potion, whether brewed correctly or not only affects the pair who put their hair in it, it would have no affect upon him."

"Correct," conceded Snape grudgingly. Then attempting to reassert his authority he added, "And when Mr. Malfoy suffers no adverse effects from the potion, I will award fifty points to Slytherin for his kind assistance. Potter and Granger will then drink their potion as requested."

"A further fifty points will be deducted from Gryffindor for your insubordination and fabrications – in addition to the fifty points already deducted. Plus you will have a second week of detention in my dungeon to learn the discipline of obedience ... which you so badly lack."

But Snape's victorious grin was wiped from his face when Rick enthusiastically agreed to his terms without a moment's hesitation. Harry, Hermione and Dean Thomas were all turning green at the prospect of Gryffindor going down one hundred points while Slytherin went up fifty – how would they ever catch them up?

But before any of them could object, Draco spoke up for the first time. "Well I don't agree. There's no way I'm drinking anything out of Potter and Granger's cauldron."

"Come, come now Mr. Malfoy," said Snape silkily. "Here is an opportunity for Slytherin to go one hundred and fifty points up on Gryffindor in the House Cup, and I assure you, the potion, no how badly prepared, will have no ill effect upon you, at all."

"No ... no sir," said Draco nervously, "I ... I ... just don't trust those Gryffindors." Snape now stared very hard at Draco, as if he was really seeing him for the first time. His Legilimency skills were not on a par with Rick's, but it was clear that Draco was lying and hiding something. He was starting to sweat under Snape's intense scrutiny.

"It could all be a trick, between the three of them sir, to poison me," he said desperately trying to justify himself. All this time, Rick was probing Draco's mind, trying to find some evidence of what he done. He found it.

"Professor Snape," lied Rick, "I saw Draco pour something into their cauldron from an envelope, that he returned to an inside pocket of his robes."

"Rubbish," spat Draco, "I didn't put anything in Potter's potion and there's nothing in my pockets."

"Are you sure," said Rick lifting his wand and uttering the Summoning Charm "Accio." But Draco clamped his hand over his robes, against the lip of the inner pocket. A Summoning Charm was not going to be strong enough to extract the envelope.

Rick quickly did a Severing Charm, opening up a slit beneath Draco's hand, then before he could cover it said "Accio" again. A brown envelope popped out through the slit and floated towards Rick. Draco made a lunge for it, but Rick used a Banishing Charm to send it up, out of reach and towards Snape who plucked it from the air.

He studied it carefully. It had the words *Amanita Phalloides* written on the outside, in what he immediately recognised as the elegant hand of Lucius Malfoy. He carefully held the envelope at some distance from his face, peering inside at the dregs within. Yes, the label was correct. "Dried and powdered Death Caps," said Snape. "The most

poisonous mushroom in this part of the world. In a concentrated form such as this, it causes death within minutes.”

He then carried on as if he were delivering a regular Potions lecture. “Flobberworms are particularly susceptible to fungal poisons. However, their very simple digestive systems are impervious to most other poisons and Potions ingredients. As such, they are ideal for detecting the presence of fungal poisons, particularly as they turn different colours depending upon the variety of mushroom or toadstool they are tested with. Death Caps, for instance, turn them red.”

Without missing a beat, he took down a jar from a nearby shelf, and removed a wriggling Flobberworm. First, he dunked it in Rick and Dean’s cauldron. “As you can see,” he said holding it up and examining it, “it suffers no ill-effects from the Folliculus Rerverus Potion. Now let’s see how it fares in this one” he said, dunking it in Harry and Hermione’s cauldron.

When he removed the unfortunate Flobberworm, it had turned bright red and swelled to twice its previous size. It was also, obviously, quite dead. “Ah,” observed Snape. “The classic response of a Flobberworm to Death Caps.

He then turned to Draco and asked in a feigned tone of casual curiosity, “So would you care to explain Mr. Malfoy, just why you would have an envelope containing a lethal poison such as dried powdered Death Caps in the pocket of your robes, and how most of it seems to have found its way into Mr. Potter’s caldron?” Draco’s face went red, but he kept his mouth shut, he knew that he was cornered.

“You do realise Mr. Malfoy, that poisoning one’s fellow students, is completely against school rules,” said Snape with heavy sarcasm. “It shall be my unfortunate duty, to have to report these events to the Headmaster. I must tell you that the certain outcome, will be your immediate suspension from Hogwarts, pending an official enquiry which will, in all likelihood, result in your permanent expulsion from this school. You should also be aware, that attempted murder is a criminal offence, for a wizard of your age, and is punishable by a lengthy sentence in Azkaban.”

Draco, held his head high and replied in his most arrogant voice. “I deny everything. Anyone could have put that poison in Potter’s cauldron and then slipped the envelope into my pocket, to pin the blame on me, just to get me expelled. No Malfoy has ever been expelled from Hogwarts, nor convicted like a common criminal.”

“My father will not stand for these trumped up charges. I think you will find that he has quite a lot of influence at the Ministry. Then turning angrily on Harry he said, “Don’t worry Potter, I’ll be back ... you’ll keep.” He then turned and stormed out of the dungeon.

Snape shrugged his shoulders in resignation. Draco was probably right. His father would get him off. “Everyone clean up, and put your things away,” he said. “All house point deductions and detentions are rescinded,” he added as an afterthought, before exiting the dungeon.

“Can you wait a minute Rick?” asked Harry as Dean followed the last of the Slytherins out, leaving Rick, Harry, and Hermione alone in the dungeon.

“I just wanted to say thank you. Hermione and I would be dead by now, if it weren’t for you, I don’t know how we can ever repay you.”

“I do,” said Rick. “How about you both try trusting me, for a change.” Harry and Hermione both began protesting that of course they trusted him, but Rick brushed their protests aside with a wave of his hand.

“Listen, I’m very perceptive, and I know you don’t trust me – OK? Look, I know that I’m a bit different and I can do things that you never learned here at Hogwarts, but please believe me when I say that I’m on your side – one hundred percent.”

After lunch, Harry, Hermione and Ron were in a private huddle in a corner of the Gryffindor common room. Hermione had recounted the events of the morning’s Potions class to Ron, as the story of Malfoy’s attempted poisoning of Harry and Hermione had not yet got around the school.

“So,” said Hermione finally, “Does that change your opinion of Rick then?” Ron was quiet for a few minutes. He was using his not inconsiderable intellectual abilities to try to find an explanation which fitted his dislike of Rick – and he found one.

“I’ve got it!” he said triumphantly. “He was in on the whole thing all along. The plan was to poison Harry, right? But as it turned out, both Harry and Hermione would have to drink the potion. Of course Malfoy was probably more than happy to poison Hermione as well – we all know how much he hates her. But, when Godfry discovered that Hermione was going to die as well, he decided to scuttle the whole thing, it’s obvious,” said Ron, clearly convinced by his own argument.

“What utter nonsense Ron,” said Hermione. “If he was really in with Voldemort, the Death Eaters and the Malfoys, why would he ruin all their plans just to save a Muggle-born witch, it’s completely absurd!”

“No it’s not,” said Ron, “I’ll tell you why. It’s because he fancies you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Ron, of course he doesn’t fancy me. I think I might have noticed if he did.”

“Well actually Hermione, you may know every word in ‘Hogwarts, a History’ and half the books in the library, but there are some things that you just don’t seem to have a clue about,” said Ron.

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you, Ron. You can’t see what’s right under your nose sometimes, if it doesn’t happen to fit in with your prejudices,” retorted Hermione angrily.

“You’re wrong Hermione, if you’re talking about Godfry,” said Ron. “I gave you a perfectly rational explanation for what happened in Potions this morning. It explains everything. How do you explain the fact that Godfry alone, managed to catch Malfoy putting something in your caldron, when everyone else was distracted by Zabini’s diversion?”

“Even if he did see Malfoy put something in your cauldron, how could he be so certain that it was a deadly poison, that he would dare to

stand up to Snape like that and risk going a hundred and fifty points down against Slytherin? How did he know that it wasn't just a harmless prank – the sort of thing that Fred and George would get up to? Go on, tell me then,” demanded Ron.

“He’s got a point,” said Harry, “It is kind of hard to explain.”

“Oh, I’m so confused,” said Hermione. “There are just so many things he seems to know and do which I really don’t understand, but there is something about him that makes me trust him, I just can’t explain it.

“Oh, come on Hermione,” replied Ron. “Since when are you the ‘intuitive type’, going on feelings rather than using your brilliant mind. You know what ... I think you fancy Godfrey! That’s why you’re behaving so out of character. That’s why you’re so blind to his true intentions.”

“Ron, that’s enough,” cried Hermione, jumping to her feet, “I do not fancy Rick Godfrey, I’ve never heard anything so stupid in all my life,” and with that she dashed up to her dormitory.

“She does fancy him you know,” Ron said to Harry in a jealous tone, “I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, I think you might be right there,” said Harry. “I just don’t know what to think any more, it’s just too confusing.”

“We’re going to have to keep an eye on her you know,” sighed Ron. “Oh well, look on the bright side mate, we’ve gotten rid of that git Malfoy.”

“For now,” replied Harry, “But let’s wait till he’s safely locked up in Azkaban before breaking out the butterbeers.”

Please review ...

Chapter 5 - Welcome Back to the Inquisition

At breakfast the following morning, the events in Snape's dungeon of the day before were the hot topic. Draco Malfoy was conspicuous by his absence from the Slytherin table.

Just as Harry and Hermione were about to leave for their first class, Professor McGonagall took them aside.

"The Headmaster would like to have a word with the two of you, please go up to his office at once. The password is 'Gallop and Gobstopper'," said Professor McGonagall, attempting to keep a straight face. "I will send a note to Professor Flitwick, to let him know that you will be late for your Charms class."

"Gallop and Gobstopper," said Hermione, stepping onto the rotating stairs, followed by Harry.

Professor Dumbledore rose to greet them as they entered his office. "Harry, Hermione, thank goodness you are both unharmed."

"You can thank Rick, that we're alive," said Hermione, "he saved us yesterday."

"Yes, so I heard. Please sit down," said the Headmaster, drawing a comfortable leather sofa up behind them with a wave of his hand. "Professor Snape gave me a complete account of everything that happened in the Potions dungeon yesterday."

"Will Malfoy be expelled?" asked Harry hopefully.

The Headmaster sighed. "By all rights, he should be expelled – and imprisoned. But with all judicial bodies dissolved under Fudge's 'State of Emergency', and the great influence that his father wields over the Minister of Magic, I am afraid that nothing of the sort will happen."

"Draco was acting under his father's direction. Professor Snape has identified the writing on the envelope containing the poison as belonging to Lucius Malfoy," said the Headmaster. "There is no doubt in my mind, that the origin of this attempt, was Voldemort, himself."

"Professor Dumbledore, do you trust Rick Godfry?" Hermione suddenly asked, determined to solve the troubling enigma of Rick. "He saved our lives yesterday and he also protected me from an awful curse of Malfoy's in Defence Against the Dark Arts last week. But there is something very strange about him, he seems to have extraordinary abilities and it is obvious that he is hiding things. Ron suspects that he's spying for Voldemort."

"I shall be very happy to answer your question, Hermione. In fact Mr. Godfry is one of the reasons why I wanted to talk with you. Yes, you can most definitely trust Rick Godfry. I am certain that he is completely committed to our side," said Dumbledore.

"It is true that Mr. Godfry has some unusual abilities, which he is concealing. But he is doing so for very good reasons. Please, trust me, when I tell you that I am fully aware of Rick Godfry's secrets, and that you have nothing at all to fear from him. On the contrary," he continued, directing his gaze at Harry, "he will be a most valuable ally, if you give him the opportunity."

"Please, pass this message on to Mr. Weasley, although I fear that it may be a little difficult to convince him to trust Mr. Godfry," said Dumbledore, with a knowing smile.

"A little difficult?" exclaimed Harry, "Talk about an understatement! Ron is dead set against him. I just don't understand why, but when it comes to Rick, he's just beyond reason."

"Ah," said Dumbledore, with a look of concern, "that may cause some problems. It may be that there is a little jealousy involved. The three of you have shared an inseparable bond since your first year at Hogwarts. Rick is a very friendly and charming young man. It would seem only natural, in the circumstances, that Rick might befriend one or the other of you, which could, in time, alter the dynamic of your unique friendship."

"Mr. Weasley's family background, with five older brothers, all of whom have excelled in different ways, makes him feel insecure at times, I fear," said Dumbledore. "He feels the need to prove himself,

and he has surely done that, many times over. But, it has always been as a member of your extraordinary team. For him, the bond he shares with you is more than friendship. It defines who he is, and, it sets him apart from his brothers.”

“I suspect that he feels, either consciously or not, that Mr. Godfry may cause this bond to break. He may even fear that in time ... Mr. Godfry could supplant him.”

“I have also noticed, that Mr. Godfry has made quite an impression on the witches at Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore with an amused smile. “It is a natural instinct for other males to treat him as rival. Particularly, if they fear that someone they care for very much is attracted to him,” added Dumbledore. His eyes came to rest significantly upon Hermione, who blushed brightly, and looked down at her feet. It was a reaction that Harry didn’t fail to notice.

“Mr. Weasley’s heart is the right place and he is as committed to our cause as any of us in this room,” said Dumbledore. “In time, I hope, he will come to accept Mr. Godfry as a comrade. But until then, it may be best if you do not repeat everything that I have said concerning him. Perhaps if you just tell him that I trust Mr. Godfry completely.”

“I would ask you both, to assist Mr. Godfry in concealing his powers,” said Dumbledore. “Especially, from your friend Ronald Weasley. As long as he remains hostile to Mr. Godfry, there is a danger that he may behave unwisely, and divulge things that are best kept hidden.”

“Now, I must come to another matter,” said Dumbledore with a sad sigh. “It appears that I will, very soon, be relieved of my duties as Headmaster of Hogwarts.”

“What, but how ... they can’t just ...,” Harry and Hermione reacted together in alarm.

“Ah, but they can,” said Dumbledore, nodding his head in resignation. “All vestiges of fairness, justice, due process, and decency have been ruthlessly suppressed by Fudge. Wizarding society has fallen into very dark times indeed.”

“But we must not despair – we must not give up,” he said staring directly at Harry.

“I, for one, shall not be giving up,” said Dumbledore with a steely determination. “I shall be working fulltime in the Order, but I shall also be keeping an eye on Hogwarts and its students. Fudge will no doubt put in one of his lackeys as Headmaster. I have every confidence in the Hogwarts Professors to do their utmost to protect the students.”

“But without you here, there will be no one to stop Voldemort from ...,” said Harry in despair.

“But there will,” interrupted Dumbledore in an assertive voice. “I won’t pretend that the coming weeks and months are going to be easy for you. But I shall remain in touch with events here. There are your Professors, all of whom I trust. But particularly – and I want you to remember this, Harry – there is Mr. Godfrey. Stay close to him and learn to rely upon him.”

The Headmaster was absent from his place in the Great Hall at dinner that evening. As the students began their meal, the doors of the Great Hall swung opened and in strode four robed figures. There was a buzz of excited whispers as the four figures made their way up to the teachers’ table.

One of them was a short plump little witch. When she reached the teachers’ table she turned around to survey the students. A fluffy pink cardigan was visible beneath her robes where they parted in front.

It was none other than Dolores Umbridge, formerly High Inquisitor, and later Headmistress of Hogwarts. Standing next to her was the Minister of Internal Security and also Deputy Minister of Magic, Percy Weasley looking very smug and pleased with himself. The two wizards who had entered with them, obviously both Aurors, now flanked them in front of the teachers’ table.

Percy drew a scroll from his robes, then puffing himself up, self importantly, he made his announcement:

“By order of Cornelius Oswald Fudge, the Minister of Magic and the powers vested in me as his Minister of Internal Security and under the provisions of the State of Emergency Act, I hereby proclaim this Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-six.”

He then waved his wand at the scroll to break the official seal of the Minister of Magic and unfurled the parchment ceremoniously. Adjusting his spectacles, he cleared his throat, and began to read:

“I, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic, in exercising my executive responsibilities to ensure the safety and well-being of all students attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, declare that the following measures shall take place with immediate effect.

1. I hereby relieve Albus Dumbledore of his post as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

2. I hereby appoint Dolores Jane Umbridge to serve as Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

3. I hereby vest in Headmistress Umbridge, authority to take such measures as she deems fit in securing the safety and ensuring the proper education of all witches and wizards attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

4. I hereby vest in Headmistress Umbridge, authority to dismiss any member of the Hogwarts staff whom she deems to be failing to carry out their teaching responsibilities in a satisfactory manner.

5. I hereby dissolve the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Board of Governors.

6. I hereby appoint Lucius Malfoy as Executive Governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

7. I hereby charge the Hogwarts' Executive Governor with the revision of the Charter of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and its Articles of Convocation and Suffrage. I mandate him to ensure

that the school shall provide a suitable and proper magical education to the sons and daughters of all witches and wizards of this land.”

Hermione gasped as the final measure, dropping her head into her hands in despair. Most of the other students looked totally stunned, trying to understand what all the bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo meant, apart from the obvious – that their beloved Headmaster was gone and had been replaced by a witch whom almost every student above first year loathed.

Percy pompously rolled up his scroll, returning it to his robes and bowed his head to the new Headmistress, handing proceedings over to her. She immediately walked around the teachers’ table and stood at Professors Dumbledore’s place, resting her hands on the back of his empty chair ... her chair.

A collective sigh of déjà vu arose from the students.

“Hem, hem,” she began with her annoying throat clearing. “It is a great pleasure to back at Hogwarts, and to see so many familiar and cherished faces,” she said, looking over at the Slytherin table. “It seems like only yesterday that I was standing here in this very hall as your Headmistress.”

“I feel privileged and greatly honoured, that our illustrious Minister of Magic, the Right Honourable Cornelius Fudge, has shown such confidence in me, to entrust me, once more, with this noble undertaking. I intend to make an immediate start in rectifying some of the more glaring mistakes of my predecessor ... particularly in the area of teaching appointments.” The expressions on the faces of the teachers sitting at the teachers’ table, had slowly changed from shock to horror, and finally to outrage, as events had unfolded. Now they were now sitting alertly, listening to her words with an air of foreboding.

“Hem, hem,” said Umbridge. “It is indeed fortunate that I had the opportunity last year in my role as High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, to rigorously evaluate and scrutinise the performance of all the present Hogwarts staff. So happily, I come to my present task fully prepared.”

“I have already taken steps to find suitably qualified teachers for the following positions: Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, and Transfiguration. The present incumbents of all three positions performed woefully in my evaluations. However I shall permit them to remain in a temporary capacity until their replacements have been appointed.”

Hagrid immediately jumped to his feet, his face bright red. Umbridge gave a sign to the Aurors to be ready for trouble, but Hagrid simply turned and stormed wordlessly out of the hall. Professor Trelawney was teaching Divination alone this year, as the other centaurs had finally been persuaded to allow Firenze to return to their fold in the forest. However, as was her custom, she was absent from the evening meal.

But Professor McGonagall was there, and her face was etched in stony fury. Were it not for the Aurors, Umbridge would most probably have been transfigured into something truly terrible by now – such as a chamber pot – a full one.

Turning to Tonks, Umbridge made her signature “Hem, hem.” Then smiling falsely, she said, “You may have noticed my previous reference about having already evaluated the performance of all the present Hogwarts staff. That didn’t include you of course, because you weren’t here last year. And also ... hem, hem ... because you are no longer a member of that staff.”

Tonks just sat there stunned. “You may leave now Miss err ...,” said Umbridge. She had obviously been instructed to root out anyone suspected of involvement with the Order.

“Tonks,” prompted Percy from the other side of the table.

Then indicating to the Aurors that they should draw their wands again, Umbridge said pointedly, “Right now!”

Tonks rose to her feet, turned a withering gaze on Umbridge and muttered loudly for all the hall to hear, “Stupid cow!” then turned and left the hall, her hair changing colours violently from crimson to black

to yellow to purple as she fought to control her seething anger. It was a memorable an exit.

“Hem, hem, ah that’s much better now isn’t it children,” she said patronisingly to the shocked students, who were reeling from the changes that had come upon them, like a bolt out of the blue.

“I will not be appointing a replacement Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, as I do not consider it to be an appropriate subject for school children. At least certainly not for everyone,” she continued in her infuriatingly condescending manner.

“The ‘Inquisitorial Squad’, which was so helpful and supportive last year, is to be re-formed. All of last year’s members are invited to join. Other students who demonstrate a suitably supportive attitude to myself, and the Ministry of Magic, may be privileged to receive an invitation to join this select body. Members of the squad will receive special lessons in ‘magical law enforcement’ from visiting Ministry Aurors.”

“Hem, hem,” said Umbridge. “That will be all for now, enjoy your meal.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were totally thunderstruck. Hermione, who was sitting between them, was in tears. She blurted out to her friends that the so-called ‘revision’ of the Hogwarts charter would probably mean that all Muggle-born witches and wizards would be thrown out of Hogwarts. Especially, since Lucius Malfoy had been appointed to carry it out.

Suddenly Ron looked up and stared. “Just when we thought things couldn’t get any worse, look what just walked in,” he said, glaring in the direction of the Slytherin table. Harry and Hermione followed his gaze to see Draco Malfoy striding triumphantly up to the Slytherin table, grinning from ear to ear. Noticing the three Gryffindors glaring at him, he swaggered over to them and grinning evilly at Harry, ran his thumb across his throat and said, “Looks like your time is up Potter. There’s no more Dumbly-does to save your skin now.” Then he burst into wicked laughter.

Harry started rising from the table, reaching for their wand. But before he could get to his feet or Hermione could stop him, Rick who was sitting along a bit on the opposite side of the table said “No,” holding up his hand. Harry felt himself being pushed back down onto the bench, although to everyone else it just looked like he had changed his mind about attacking Malfoy.

“Oh Harry,” cried Hermione in distress, “Don’t be so stupid, he’s just trying to provoke you to attack him so that Umbridge will have an excuse to do ... who knows what. Have you forgotten how she tried to put an Unforgivable curse on you last year?”

Draco meanwhile, swaggering like a king, made his way over to his friends at the Slytherin table, who were celebrating his return and all the sudden changes at Hogwarts, which had tipped the tables towards them. It was as if all their Christmases had come at once.

For once in his life, Ron Weasley wasn’t hungry and neither were Harry or Hermione. “Let’s get back to the Gryffindor common room.” said Harry, “I don’t feel very safe here in the Great Hall, any longer.” Ron and Hermione nodded in understanding and Rick also rose to leave the hall, following a short distance behind them.

For as much as the Slytherins were elated at the turn of events, most of the Gryffindors were depressed, but none as much as Harry and his friends as they sat in their usual corner of the common room, trying to understand the implications of it all.

Ron was also seething at the part that the great turncoat git Percy had played in the evening’s events. He was beyond embarrassment now when it came to Percy. As far as Ron was concerned, Percy’s behaviour didn’t reflect on him and Ginny and his family any more – Percy wasn’t a Weasley any longer – he had been excommunicated. He should change his name to ‘Percival Pompous Fudgelet’, he thought in disgust.

These thoughts were interrupted by Hermione, who gave him an ‘edited version’ of their talk with Dumbledore that morning. Ron was

upset that they hadn't told him sooner what Dumbledore had said about his leaving Hogwarts.

"Well, this is our first opportunity for a private conversation," said Hermione defensively," and I never dreamed that it was going to happen so quickly."

"Me neither," mumbled Harry morosely, he was still in a state of shock.

"You know, I think Dumbledore may be losing the plot," said Ron.

"What do you mean?" demanded Hermione.

"Well telling you that we should trust Godfry," said Ron.

"Ron, Professor Dumbledore told us that he has complete confidence that Rick is on our side, and that we have nothing to fear from him," said Hermione, desperately wanting to convince Ron.

Ron turned doubtfully to Harry for confirmation, "Did Dumbledore really say that?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "He said we should trust Rick and treat him as an ally."

"Trust him?" gesticulated Ron, "That just proves my point that Dumbledore's lost the plot ... just too much pressure I guess ... you can't really blame him."

"Ronald Weasley, how can you be so stupid, bloody-minded, and divisive?" demanded Hermione, finally letting her frustrations get the better of her. "If ever there was a time that we needed to trust in Dumbledore and the Order, it's now. If ever there was a time that we needed help from a powerful ally, like Rick, it's now. If ever there was a time that the three of us needed to stand together and support each other, it's now."

"Just look at Harry, look at the state he's in with all that has happened tonight, and all you can do, is single-mindedly pursue your prejudices

and petty jealousies,” said Hermione, getting carried away and saying things that she hadn’t intended to say about either Harry or Ron – although they were perfectly true.

Ron’s face turned red. “Jealousies?” he demanded. “And who exactly do you think I’m jealous of then?” Of course they all knew she meant Rick, but Hermione had got control of her temper by now and kept silent. Things were bad enough without her making them worse.

“You know, I’m the only one who can see Godfry for what he really is, and judge him rationally,” said Ron. “You ...,” he said pointing at Hermione, “you’re just like every other witch in this school, you’ve fallen under his spell. He has some strange power over people – particularly witches, how come you can’t see that?”

“Ron,” said Hermione, trying to salvage the situation, “Professor Dumbledore said he knows all about Rick’s unusual powers, and that he trusts him completely.”

“Ah ha!” said Ron, as if he was about to say ‘checkmate’ in a game of wizard chess. “But what if Dumbledore is under Godfry’s power? For all we know, he could be using the Imperious Curse, or some even more powerful and irresistible variant, that he learned from this mysterious master of his. What then? All of Dumbledore’s assurances are worthless, and mean nothing.”

Hermione realised that there was no way out of this and wanted desperately to minimise the damage, especially to Harry. “Please, Ron,” she pleaded, “I just don’t want to keep fighting with you over Rick. I accept that you cannot trust him, and I’m going to stop trying to convince you otherwise. But you have to accept that Harry and I believe Professor Dumbledore, when he says that we should trust Rick. You have to stop trying to destroy that trust, because without it, we really don’t have much hope right now,” she concluded sadly.

“And you mate?” said Ron turning to Harry, “Do you believe that when Dumbledore said to trust Godfry, that it’s not possible that he was under Godfry’s power?”

Harry didn't seem to be completely with them. He had to struggle to come out of the shell that he was crawling into, and really consider Ron's words. Finally he said, "You know you're really clever Ron, with your logic. You can prove that black is white one day and that white is black the next. I know I can't persuade you that Rick can be trusted. But neither can you, persuade me, that he can't."

"Everything that Rick has done, has been for our benefit," said Harry. "Just before, in the Great Hall, when I lost my head and swallowed Malfoy's bait, Rick saved me again." Ron and Hermione looked at Harry in surprise.

"He cast some kind of spell than stopped me from getting up and attacking Malfoy. It pushed me back down onto the bench, I couldn't raise my wand at all," explained Harry.

"And did it occur to you," countered Ron, "that he turned you into a sitting duck, so that Malfoy could blast you while you were defenceless?"

"Ron!" yelled Hermione, this was really too much, "That's ridiculous —"

But Harry put up his hand to silence her. "Ron!" he cried, more in frustration than in anger. "What Hermione said before was right. This constant bickering is driving me crazy – and I really don't need it right now. I can't convince you and you can't convince me, or Hermione. So let's just leave it. All we're doing is going round and round in circles and I can't handle it at the moment, not after everything else that's happened tonight."

"Dumbledore told me to trust Rick and that is exactly what I'm going to do," said Harry.

"But Harry, why can't you see —" interrupted Ron.

"Let me finish Ron," said Harry becoming more assertive. "With everything that has happened tonight, I am completely vulnerable. There is nothing left to protect me from Voldemort, I'm a sitting duck. He doesn't need Rick's help to kill me. With Fudge, Umbridge, and

Lucius Malfoy in charge of things, I'm practically defenceless, and you and Hermione can't save me – so don't even start on that."

"I've only got one hope, and it's Rick," said Harry. "That's what Dumbledore told me. If I can't believe in Dumbledore and Rick then I might as well just ask Malfoy if he wouldn't mind taking me to see Voldemort right now. Can't you understand that, Ron?" he demanded in desperation.

"Yeah, I can understand," said Ron, "It's not just Dumbledore and Hermione that he's got under his spell – it's you too, Harry. Don't worry, I've got the message. You and Hermione don't believe me anymore – but you believe Rick."

"OK, OK!" he said holding his hand up as Harry started bashing his fists in frustration on the table, sending several of Hermione's books flying to the floor. "I'll stop trying to convince you. I can tell when I'm not wanted, you have both made your choice, and it's perfectly clear what it is," he said staring directly into Hermione's face. Ron's face was red with anger, but his eyes were full of hurt. He turned and dashed for his dormitory, before the tears came.

Rick was sitting by the fireplace and had been observing their argument. He had been well aware of their differences of opinion about him, since the start of term. As Ron stormed from the common room, Rick was able to read the latest chapter in the dispute from his face – there was no need to probe any further.

Rick had been keeping his distance from the three, figuring that any attempt to get closer to them would just make matters worse between them. But with the events in the Great Hall this evening, he knew he had to make a move. Harry was very vulnerable and Rick had to protect him. It wasn't a question of if there would be another attempt on Harry's life – only of when. Rick rose from his chair and walked across the common room to where Harry and Hermione were sitting unhappily in silent thought.

"Err ... could I join you for a moment?" asked Rick, looking at Harry.

"Sure," said Harry.

"I spoke with the Headmaster, before he left Hogwarts today," said Rick, trying to find the best way to approach the difficult subject. "He said that he had told you to trust me and I really hope that you can. You don't need me to tell you what kind of danger you're in, I'm sure you know."

"Yeah ... don't worry," said Harry, "I sure do. It looks like Voldemort has finally got me right where he wants me. I'm surrounded, and he's moving in for the kill ... I don't think they'll be calling me 'The Boy Who Lived', for very much longer," he added dejectedly.

"Oh Harry, please stop that morbid fatalism," pleaded Hermione, tears running down her cheeks, "We're not beaten yet ... unless we believe we are. Voldemort failed to kill you when you were a totally defenceless little baby, and no matter how bad things are now, you're not that defenceless."

"Hermione's right Harry," said Rick in an assuring tone. "I know things look really bad right now, especially with Professor Dumbledore gone, but there is something that you need to know."

Harry and Hermione both look up at Rick – he had their attention.

"I think that I can protect you ... but you have to give me your trust," said Rick. "I know it's hard to trust someone who is hiding secrets from you. All I can tell you, is that the less that you – and everyone else – know about me, the better I'll be able to protect you."

"That's a lot of trust you're asking for," said Harry.

"But Harry, your life depends upon it," pleaded Hermione. "Please trust Rick – we have to."

"Well if you're so powerful, why don't you just kill Voldemort?" asked Harry, "And then this whole nightmare will be over."

It was a good question. Rick sat deep in thought for a minute before replying. "I'm not really sure, but I don't think I can. It may be because of the prophecy but it may be something else"

Rick continued turning the question over in his mind, because he didn't really understand it himself. His power was like the distilled essence of the Light. Part of that essence was a kind of moral or spiritual quality – a sense of connectedness. Yes that was it, he felt connected to everything and everyone, not just 'good guys'. For as much as he abhorred the evil behaviour of someone like Draco Malfoy, he couldn't hate him or want him dead – he felt connected – even to Draco Malfoy – even to Tom Riddle.

Finally he said to Harry and Hermione, who were waiting for him to finish his explanation, "No Harry, I don't think I can kill Voldemort – you are going to have to do that. But I can help you."

"How can you know that?" asked Hermione, puzzled.

"I'm really sorry," said Rick. "But I can't tell you my whole story. What I can tell you though," he said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder and staring intensely into his eyes, "is that if you let me stay close to you I can protect you."

"OK," said Harry. He really had to trust Rick. The more they talked, the easier it became. Rick was turning out to be very easy to trust.

Hermione also trusted him, although her curiosity about his powers – and who he really was – and where he had really come from – was driving her slightly crazy. What was also starting to drive her crazy was that as she spent more time around Rick she was beginning to feel emotions that she had never felt before. Previously, she had despised Lavender and Parvati and all the other girls who swooned over him, but now she seemed totally unable to stop herself being drawn towards the mysterious Rick. That was one thing that Ron had been spot on about.

Please review ...

Chapter 6 - Quidditch, Quaffles and Blue Balls

The end of the week arrived without further drama. Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad, Slytherins all, were starting to make their obnoxious presence felt around the corridors of Hogwarts.

Rick stayed close to Harry. Hermione was usually with them. Rick didn't want to make it too obvious that he was acting as Harry's protector. To others, it probably looked like the unthinkable had happened – after five years, the 'Dream Team' had fallen apart. Either that, or Rick had displaced Ron in a reformed triad.

Harry and Hermione tried hard to be friendly with Ron, but he shunned them, and always made a point of sitting well away from them at mealtimes and in classes.

There was much gossip in the Gryffindor common room about Harry, Hermione, Rick, and Ron. The witches were particularly curious to know what, if anything was happening between Hermione and Rick, Gryffindor's most desirable wizard.

The other hot topic was the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Harry had been waiting for Umbridge to reinstate the life ban that she had placed upon him last year, and which Dumbledore had subsequently rescinded. As each day passed his fear that she would reinstate the ban was slowly being replaced by the fear that she was deliberately not reinstating it, because she wanted him to play ... that something bad was going to happen in the match. Or, maybe she just didn't see any point in a life ban given his very short life expectancy.

"Quidditch is a very dangerous game," said Hermione on the Friday night before the big match, as she sat with Harry and Rick in the common room. "You better be very careful tomorrow Harry, you know how many close calls you've had playing Quidditch. It would be all too easy to make an attack look like an accident during the game."

"Right," said Harry. "I'll try, but there's so much happening in a Quidditch match, that it's hard to concentrate on other things sometimes."

“Well Harry, you’re just going to have to concentrate,” said Hermione forcefully. “Forget about winning, and forget about the stupid Snitch – let Malfoy have it for once. Just concentrate on staying alive. Do you think you can do that Harry?”

“I really don’t know,” said Harry. “When I’m on my broom in a Quidditch match, something else just takes over, and when I see the golden gleam of the Snitch ... it’s hard to explain,” he said shaking his head.

“Oh Harry,” said Hermione in exasperation, “it’s just a game, remember.”

“That’s right,” agreed Rick, “it’s just a game.”

Harry looked wistfully over towards where Ron was sitting with Ginny and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Ron understood about Quidditch. Hermione just didn’t get it and it looked like Rick didn’t either. He was really starting to miss his other best friend. He remembered in their fourth year, how they had fought for months over his name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. In the end they got over it and were best friends again. He desperately hoped that they would get over this one.

The whole school turned out for the first Quidditch match of the year. Gryffindor versus Slytherin was always the highlight of the season.

Madam Hooch gave the two teams her usual lecture about fair play and penalties for cheating, then threw the ball up in the air to start the game.

Rick was sitting beside Hermione at one end of the Gryffindor stand, where he would not be too visible if he had to take action.

“Do you like Quidditch?” asked Hermione.

"I don't really know," said Rick. "This is my first game. I've never played it myself. In fact, I've never even been on a broom." He looked at the players dashing about at breakneck speed. "But, it looks like a lot of fun."

Hermione had stopped listening to him. Looking over to the Professors' stand she had spotted someone sitting next to the Headmistress who made her blood run cold and her skin crawl. It was Lucius Malfoy – this could not be good. She nervously pointed him out to Rick.

Rick just seemed to stare fixedly at him for about half a minute then said wryly, "Another, for whom the world stops for Quidditch."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Hermione, puzzled.

"Right now, all Lucius Malfoy can think about is the Quidditch match. He's imagining a great Slytherin victory, with Draco bringing glory to the Malfoy name by capturing the Snitch. If he does have any plans to attack Harry, we won't need to worry about them until the game is over." He said this with a certainty, as if Lucius Malfoy had told him himself – which in fact he had, although not intentionally.

"How can you know all that?" demanded Hermione. "Surely it's just supposition."

"Hermione, trust me, I know it," said Rick quietly, realising too late that he should have kept quiet. How was he going to talk himself out of this one?

"But how?" she demanded again.

"Surely you've heard of Legilimency," said Rick. "My master in New Zealand was an expert. And, err ... he gave me a bit of training. It comes in useful at times."

"Well of course I've heard of Legilimency," replied Hermione as if it should be obvious that she would know about such things. "I read all about it last year when Harry was taking Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape."

“It’s quite impossible to use Legilimency over such a long distance. You have to be in very close contact with the other person – and anyway, I didn’t see you cast the Legilimens Spell. However you’ve figured out Lucius Malfoy’s intentions – if indeed you have – it can’t be Legilimency.”

Rick had to smile, Hermione was living up to her reputation as the font of all knowledge.

“Hermione, I know that’s what it says in Slinkhard’s Defensive Magical Theory, and that’s the way it’s usually done. But my master must have taught me some special technique that works over longer distances,” bluffed Rick.

For a moment, Hermione was actually more impressed by the fact that Rick had read the Slinkhard text, than the possibility that he had somehow discovered what Lucius Malfoy was thinking. But then her thoughts turned back to Lucius Malfoy. “We had better keep an eye on him, just the same. I doubt that he would attack Harry openly in front of so many spectators, but he might be able to make it look like an accident,” she said.

The Quidditch match had meanwhile become very exciting. Slytherin had started strongly, peppering the Gryffindor goal with the Quaffle, but Ron was in superb form, dashing manically about, defending his hoops valiantly. The Slytherin players became frustrated at their inability to score on him, but the Gryffindor spectators were inspired, and began singing loudly.

“Ronald Weasley, he’s our King,

He never lets the Quaffle in,

Ronald Weasley you’re our King,

Eat you heart out Slytherin.”

This enraged the Slytherin team and they began resorting to their trademark foul play. Madam Hooch, however, was having none of it.

She didn't miss a trick, and kept awarding penalties to Gryffindor until the foul play stopped – by which time the score was Gryffindor 50 to Slytherin 0.

Ginny Weasley was playing Chaser today as Harry was back in his customary position of Seeker. As she gained in confidence, it became evident that she was an absolutely brilliant Chaser. Forty minutes into the game, she had scored a further 12 goals for Gryffindor, were now 170 to Slytherin 0. Ron had continued his perfect record in defence, but the Slytherin Chasers hardly got possession of the Quaffle, it was all Ginny Weasley. Her electrifying performance inspired a new song from the Gryffindor stand.

“Ginny Weasley, Quidditch Queen,

Greatest Chaser ever seen,

Slytherin don't stand a chance,

When she does her Quaffle dance.”

Hermione was getting excited along with the rest of the Gryffindors, but she was still maintaining ‘Constant Vigilance’ on Lucius Malfoy. Suddenly she nudged Rick sharply, pointing over to the Professors’ stand where he had just risen to his feet. Rick concentrated on him again.

“He’s making his move Hermione,” said Rick. “He’s obviously given up on Slytherin winning now, and he’s going after Harry.” Rick tried not to make it sound like he could read Lucius Malfoy’s mind this time.

“Well shouldn’t we be following him then?” asked Hermione.

But Rick said nothing, he was following him. Sitting quietly with his eyes closed, he projected a map of the stadium, in his mind. Lucius Malfoy had concealed himself beneath the Professors’ stand, from where he would be able to cast spells, unobserved.

“Look,” cried Hermione. Ginny, who had just scored again, suddenly seemed to lose control of her broom, it began twisting and turning all over the place and steadily rising higher and higher.

Harry, meanwhile, had spotted the Snitch at almost the same moment that Ginny’s broom began its wild dance. Although Slytherin could not win now, Draco was desperate to beat Harry to the Snitch for once, especially with his father watching. They dipped and dived and soared together after the erratically moving Snitch. They were pushing and jostling each other as they flew, often side by side, neither of them aware of the drama taking place high above them, with Ginny and her broom.

But Hermione wasn’t interested in the battle for the Snitch, all here attention and concern was focused on Ginny. “It looks like the same spell that Professor Quirrell cast on Harry’s broom in first year,” cried Hermione anxiously. “We have to do something.”

But someone was already doing something.

“Look,” said Rick. Harry had finally spotted Ginny and was now soaring upwards in an almost vertical climb to reach her.

“Thank goodness,” said Hermione tensely. “I just hope he gets to her in time.”

“Actually,” said Rick, I think it might all be part of Lucius Malfoy’s plan.

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

“The spell on Ginny’s broom is making it uncontrollable, but not to the degree that someone with her skill is likely to be thrown off,” explained Rick. “He knew Harry would go to her rescue. I think he’s planning on killing them both together – his master stroke. It’s just the sort of thing that would appeal to his evil twisted mind.”

“He hates the Weasleys, he hates her father, he hates Ron, and right now he’s absolutely livid at the way Ginny has humiliated his precious Pureblood Slytherins,” said Rick. “He’s planning to make her pay for it.”

Harry meanwhile had reached Ginny and with a strong arm, he pulled her onto his broom, placing her in front of himself.

Then, just as Rick had predicted, Lucius Malfoy struck. He performed a clever combination Summoning/Banishing Spell. He Accio'ed Harry's broom, and simultaneously banished its two riders, effectively throwing them from the it.

A gasp went up from the spectators as Harry and Ginny began a deadly freefall, plummeting earthwards from many hundreds feet up in the air.

But then suddenly, their descent began to slow. As they came closer to the ground, a frantic Hermione saw that they appeared to be encased in what looked like a glowing blue bubble. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief, although she knew that they weren't safe yet.

Cheers rang out from the worried spectators, when they saw Harry and Ginny in the blue bubble, and realised that they were not going to be dashed to death on the Quidditch pitch, after all.

But as the bubble floated gently down, it was struck by vicious a flash of green light.

"No! It's an Avada Kedavra Curse," screamed Hermione. But then she saw to her amazement and great relief that it was unable to penetrate the bubble. Avada Kedavra Curses were supposed to be unblockable, yet it had been simply deflected away. Next followed several jagged red flashes, which Hermione imagined must be Blasting Curses, designed to destroy or shatter the blue bubble; but none of them had any effect upon it.

Turning to Rick, in relief, Hermione noticed his studied concentration. His eyes were fixed upon the blue bubble and she realised that Rick must have somehow created it, and was now in the process of slowly lowering it to the ground. She noted in amazement that he did not even have his wand out. Hermione wanted to ask him how he could

do wandless magic like that, she wanted to ask him so many questions.

With great difficulty and supreme self-control, she managed to remain silent – she did not want to break Rick's concentration and cause the bubble to burst or crash. She also didn't want to draw anyone's attention to Rick. She forced herself to sit quietly, watching the blue bubble floating downwards. When it finally touched down she let out a huge sigh of relief.

Rick waited until the teachers and students had run forward and surrounded Harry and Ginny before removing the protective bubble. He waited until the surrounding crowd obscured them from Lucius Malfoy, thus preventing him from flinging any further curses at them.

Lucius Malfoy left the Quidditch grounds in a fury and made his way to Hogsmead, from where he Apparated to Malfoy Manor. He was absolutely livid. Slytherin had been humiliated, and his brilliant plan to do away with Potter and Arthur Weasley's youngest brat – the source of the humiliation – in one fell swoop, had been thwarted by some unknown power.

Could it have been that fool Dumbledore? Was he still at Hogwarts, hidden away somewhere? He could think of no other wizard with that kind of power. Fortunately for Rick, neither could anyone else.

Meanwhile Harry and Ginny were the centre of attention. As the blue bubble landed on the Quidditch pitch, they could be seen inside, Harry with arm wrapped protectively around Ginny. They looked quite cosy.

When the bubble disappeared, Harry delved into the sleeve of his left gauntlet and pulled out the Snitch. He had caught it in the same moment that he had spotted Ginny, and had stuffed it into his gauntlet for safe-keeping. As he raised it over his head, grinning broadly, the scoreboard was updated to read the final result – Gryffindor 330 Slytherin 0. It would go down in the history books as Gryffindor's greatest Quidditch triumph over Slytherin.

Harry and Ginny were raised on the shoulders of their team-mates, to be carried back to the inevitable celebrations in the Gryffindor common room. As they walked, they sang over and over again in joy:

“Ginny Weasley Quidditch Queen,
Greatest Chaser ever seen,
Slytherin don’t stand a chance,
When she does her Quaffle dance.”

The Gryffindor celebrations lasted well into the night. Rick had never seen Harry looking so happy or relaxed. He and Ron seemed to have put aside their differences, for tonight at least, as they sat with the other team members at the centre of the party, being toasted with butterbeers.

“Harry and Ginny seem to have ‘bonded in the bubble’,” remarked Rick to Hermione with a grin.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “They have been keeping rather close together, since the match. Of course Ginny has always liked Harry, but he never seems to notice her much, other than as Ron’s little sister.”

“I guess he couldn’t help but notice her up there in the blue bubble,” she added. “It looks like Ginny finally got some ‘quality time’ with Harry.”

“But what about Dean Thomas?” asked Rick, “I thought Ginny was Dean’s girlfriend?”

“Goodness Rick, I thought you knew ‘everything’. Ginny and Dean broke up the second week of term,” said Hermione, glad to be able to tell Rick something he didn’t know.

“Well, I guess I miss some things,” laughed Rick. “But I never picked you as the type to be up on all the latest Hogwarts gossip.”

“Hey!” said Hermione in annoyance. “When you share a dormitory with Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, believe me, you get more information than you need about who is doing what – and with whom.”

“So what happened with Ginny and Dean then?” asked Rick.

Hermione gave an ironic laugh. “Dean decided that their relationship was unhealthy.”

“Unhealthy?” asked Rick, “What do you mean, unhealthy?”

“Well let me rephrase that,” said Hermione. “Dean was ‘convinced’ by Ron that it was unhealthy – as in bad for Dean’s health. I really feel for Ginny, with all those overprotective big brothers of hers. And Ron is definitely the worst,” she added with a sigh.

“I hate to think what he’ll do to Harry then,” said Rick, “if he decides that Ginny is worth the ‘health risk’. He’s already angry enough with Harry because of me.”

“Sadly, there’s nothing to worry about on that front,” sighed Hermione. “Harry won’t let Ginny get close to him ... or let himself get close to her, or anyone else, while Voldemort’s alive. He would be too afraid of making her a target. Tonight, Harry’s filled with Quidditch euphoria. For a few hours he’s not worrying about all the dark things going on around us, and the prophecy that binds him to a fate he can’t escape.”

“But tomorrow,” she continued sadly, “those things will come flooding back to him and he’ll be filled with worry and foreboding once more. He’ll withdraw back into himself and try pushing everyone and everything away. Ginny and romance, will be the furthest things from his mind, you mark my words.”

Rick was amazed at Hermione’s profound understanding of Harry’s feelings. He could feel her heart crying out at the unbearable suffering that life had thrust upon her dear friend.

Hermione was right about Harry, of course. When they rose Sunday morning, Rick noticed that the anxiety and worry were back. The rest of the Gryffindors took longer to come down from their Quidditch high. But any remaining joy was soon extinguished at the evening meal.

When the students entered the Great Hall that evening, they noticed a guest sitting at the teachers' table next to the Headmistress. Hermione felt a sense of deep foreboding – it was Lucius Malfoy.

No one started eating – it was obvious that there was to be some kind of special announcement. When the students and Professors had all taken their places, the dumpy Headmistress made the short journey to her feet.

“Hem, hem,” she began, in her irritating manner. “It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome Mr. Lucius Malfoy, Executive Governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to address the school. As you know, Mr. Malfoy has been given the momentous task, by the Minister of Magic, of reforming the Charter of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“Governor Malfoy, we would be greatly honoured to have you address us,” she gushed, attempting to engage Lucius Malfoy with an obsequious smile.

Lucius Malfoy rose arrogantly to his feet, acknowledging the grovelling Umbridge with a disdainful nod. He paused for a moment, surveying the students assembled before him haughtily, as if he were an emperor, about to lay down the law upon his subjects.

“As you will know,” he began in his supercilious drawl, “the Minister of Magic has entrusted me with revising the Hogwarts Charter. The Minister shares the concern of many leading members of Wizarding society, that this school has for some time been failing to meet its traditional role.”

“Hogwarts,” he continued, “has a long and proud history, one which is intertwined and inseparable with that of the great Wizarding families

of this land. The primary role of this school is to educate the sons and daughters of those families to achieve their full magical potential and to inculcate the correct values of Wizarding society; to prepare them to take their rightful places in our society; to maintain our great and time-honoured traditions; to preserve the proper order of things.”

“Sadly, the previous Headmaster,” he said with distaste, “failed pathetically in this task. He allowed those of unworthy blood to debase the purity of this school and ultimately to contaminate the whole of Wizarding society.”

“The task of revising the Charter of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and its Articles of Convocation and Suffrage, to reflect the true role of this school, may take some time. These things cannot be rushed,” he droned on self-importantly. “When it is completed, the revision will be known as the ‘Malfoy Hogwarts Education Reformation Statute’.”

“In the interim, I have decided, in my capacity as Executive Governor of this school, to issue Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-seven, to take effect immediately. It will redress some of the more serious mistakes and glaring errors of the previous Headmaster,” he said, pronouncing the word ‘Headmaster’ with a tone of disgust.

He then unfurled the parchment he had been holding and commenced to read it.

“Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-seven:

Article 1: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will henceforth accept no Muggle-born students.

Article 2: Muggle-born students currently enrolled at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will not be permitted to return to the school after the Christmas break.

Article 3: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will henceforth accept only Pureblood wizards and witches.

Article 4: Mixed-blood students currently enrolled at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will be permitted to complete their education.

Article 5: The Ministry of Magic will establish a separate 'Vocational Training' institution for future mixed-blood students, where they can learn the appropriate trades necessary for them to serve their proper place in wizarding society."

He then rolled up his parchment and returned to his seat with a smug grin. Hermione was in tears. This was her worst nightmare come true, banishment from Hogwarts and the wizarding world into an uncertain and insecure future. She felt a consoling arm around her shoulder, it was Rick.

"Don't cry, Hermione," he whispered in her ear. "He won't get away with it. We'll find a way to stop him." He spoke with such fierce determination, that Hermione allowed herself to take some comfort and believe that perhaps her situation was not yet totally hopeless.

The Headmistress, meanwhile, had stood up again. After lauding Lucius Malfoy as the saviour of the wizarding world, she announced that, as a consequence of Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-seven, certain changes were to be made at Hogwarts – with immediate effect.

"All non-Pureblood prefects are hereby relieved of their duties and instructed to hand their badges in to their Head of House."

"Caretaker Filch has already been sent packing. Hogwarts is a school of magic – there is no place here for despicable Squibs."

"The Inquisitorial Squad will assume the former Caretaker's policing duties, and will have an expanded role in maintaining 'Law and Order' at Hogwarts."

"Hem, hem, that is all. Enjoy your meal," she added. But not many students were eating.

The Slytherins, Purebloods all, were too excited to eat. The position of privilege that they had been brought up to believe was theirs by birth was now going to be guaranteed by law.

But many students in the other three houses were Muggle-born or mixed-blood and their future suddenly looked grim indeed. Not much food was eaten at those three tables, that night.

Please review ...

Chapter 7 - The Temptations of Ronald Weasley

When Rick came down to the Gryffindor common room the following morning, Hermione was sitting dejectedly, curled up in a ball, in a corner. As he walked over to her, Rick saw that Hermione's eyes were all red and puffy. She looked drawn and tired as if she had not slept much on Sunday night.

"Aren't you coming for some breakfast?" asked Rick with concern. "None of us ate much last night, you must be hungry."

Hermione just shook her head. "I just can't go out and face everyone," she said. "Malfoy and the Slytherins will be unbearable – abusing all the non-Purebloods and lording it over us. I don't want to remember Hogwarts that way; I want to take some happy memories with me of the way it was – if they let me keep my memories at all," she added darkly.

"What will happen to the Muggle-borns when they throw us out?" she asked. "Will they wipe our memories so that we can't remember anything about our time at Hogwarts?"

"I'm sure they intend to wipe everything from our minds that we've learned about magic – all the spells – everything! Oh, it's just too horrible to think about," she said bursting into tears. "It's like having a part of yourself torn away and obliterated. I just can't bear to think about it."

Rick sat down next to her, wrapping both arms around her and letting her sob on his shoulder for a while. He tried sending a sense of calm and reassurance towards her. It seemed to work. Hermione stopped crying and looked up at him.

"Hermione," said Rick, looking deeply into her eyes. "It's over two months until the end of term and we're not beaten yet. We're not giving in to Lucius Malfoy's racist Pureblood supremacy plans without a fight – I know I'm not."

But in truth, Rick was feeling pretty lost himself. He had been focused on protecting Harry. But this was different. Lucius Malfoy had, in

effect, carried out a coup, that stood the wizarding world on its head, without casting so much as a curse in anger. Death Eater attacks were one thing; Rick knew he had the power to fight them. But this was about political power, control, and manipulation; an arena where Rick was a novice, and Lucius Malfoy was supreme.

That was the problem. Somehow they had to break the political hold of Malfoy and his minions – Fudge and Umbridge – but he had no idea where to begin. If only Hermione could pull herself together, she might be able to help him figure it out. She had the brains for it.

“Oh Rick, I don’t want to give up,” said Hermione, “but I’m so worried about what’s going to happen, especially after I’m thrown out of Hogwarts. What will happen to all the Muggle-born witches and wizards? Even if they can erase all our memories of magic and the wizarding world, they can’t take away our ability to do magic, so we’ll still be performing accidental magic.”

“What did you say about not being able to take away magic?” asked Rick.

“Well it’s something that has intrigued wizarding scholars throughout the ages,” replied Hermione, regaining some of her confidence as she launched into a lecture drawing upon her extensive reading on the subject. “Where does magic come from? What makes some people magical and others not? And, of course, some more magical than others,” she said looking pointedly at Rick.

“Just like alchemists,” she continued, “who try to create gold from base metals, witches and wizards through the ages, have sought ways to create magical power – but without success.”

“What about Voldemort?” asked Rick. “Didn’t he develop great magical powers?”

“That’s not the same,” said Hermione. “It is possible to increase one’s own power through knowledge or possession of powerful objects or dark rituals, but it takes loads of time and effort, and there are costs involved, both physical and mental – just look at Voldemort.”

“What I mean,” continued Hermione, “is that even the most powerful witch or wizard, can’t make a non-magical person magical or increase the magical power of another. By the same token, it’s not possible to reduce or take away the magical power from a magical person. If it were, the Ministry of Magic would have just gone around ‘un-magicking’ any Muggle-borns like me – and you can imagine what Voldemort would do if he had that power.”

“So, you never read about any witch or wizard ever ‘un-magicking’ anyone?” asked Rick, becoming interested.

Hermione thought hard for a while. “Well, I once read a rather obscure book by Germaine Pankhurst called ‘Witches of the World Unite – You Have Nothing to Lose but Your Pains (aka Wizards)’. It’s not exactly mainstream – you understand. There’s a lot about the great witch Circe in it. She was famous for transforming sailors into pigs.”

“Pigs?” asked Rick. “Why?”

“Umm ... she used to eat them apparently,” grinned Hermione. “After they’d been nicely fattened up, of course.”

“Of course,” repeated Rick.

“Pankhurst claimed in her book, that Circe could actually transform almost anything into anything else. After she met Odysseus, she gave up her evil ways and became a good witch. According to Pankhurst, she once cast a spell on an evil sorcerer, destroying his power.”

Now that’s very interesting, thought Rick.

As Ron was leaving the Great Hall after breakfast, Pansy Parkinson came up to him and with her most bewitching smile said, “Do you think I could have a little word with you, Ron?”

“What do you want to talk to me for?” asked Ron, suspiciously, looking around to see if anyone was watching.

“Ron, I just want to talk to you,” cried Pansy, looking hurt and batting her eyelashes pathetically.

“Well, whatever it is, I’m not interested,” said Ron.

“I think you might be – actually,” said Pansy in a low seductive voice. “But if you don’t give me a chance ... you’ll never find out.”

“OK,” said Ron nervously. “Let’s go somewhere private,” he added, anxious not to be seen consorting with a Slytherin.

“Follow me,” said Pansy, leading him into an empty classroom. She closed the door, casting a locking charm on it, followed by an Imperturbable Charm on the classroom, so that they couldn’t be overheard. Ron reached for his wand; he didn’t like this – it could be some sort of a trap.

“Relax, Ron,” cooed Pansy in a soothing voice as she returned her own wand to her robes, “you can trust me.”

“And why should I trust you? Or any Slytherin?” asked Ron, still holding his wand at the ready, and telling himself that this was a time for Moody’s Constant Vigilance.

“Firstly, because I like you Ron ... you’ve grown into a very handsome wizard, you know ... and a powerful one,” said Pansy seductively, moving closer to Ron, and running her finger down his chest. Ron’s vigilance was quickly becoming anything but constant.

“But that’s hardly surprising, the Weasleys are one of the oldest Pureblood families in the wizarding world,” she added, pointedly rubbing her finger on the prefect’s badge which he still wore on his chest.

“Well, I don’t care about all that Pureblood stuff,” said Ron. “It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“I think you’ll find, as the future unfolds, Ron, that you’ll be very thankful for your Pureblood lineage,” said Pansy.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” challenged Ron.

“Look Ron,” said Pansy draping herself ornately across one of the desks. “I know that you’ve allied yourself with Potter and Dumbledore and all those Muggle-borns. I’m not going to engage in a philosophical discussion or try to convince you to return to your Pureblood roots. I’m simply pointing out realities.”

“Dumbledore and those who share his ideas have had their day. History is like a pendulum; it swings back and forth between opposing ideas. If you open your eyes to what’s happening right now – here at Hogwarts and outside – at the Ministry of Magic and in the wizarding world generally, it’s obvious that the pendulum is swinging back to Pureblood Power – hard and fast.”

“Well I don’t like that idea,” said Ron defiantly.

“Ron, it doesn’t matter whether you like it or not. It doesn’t matter that you’d prefer the world to be different. The world is the way it is, regardless of how you feel about it. The only question is whether you’re going to be one of the strong ones who survive and prosper – or whether you’ll get washed away with those who can’t see the inevitable.”

“It would be very sad if that were to happen to you, Ron,” said Pansy, getting up from the desk and coming closer to him, as she switched back to her seductive tone. “You’ve got a lot going for you, you know. You were very impressive on the Quidditch pitch yesterday. You could be one of the great Keepers in Quidditch history – if you had the right kind of help, of course,” she added.

“What do you mean by ‘help’?” asked Ron suspiciously.

“Well,” smiled Pansy, “to get on to one of the really top teams, you have to be more than good, you need the right connections. My father is on the board of the Montrose Magpies – they’ve won the League Cup more times than just about all the other teams combined. And

did you know that the Montrose Magpies Keeper has also been Keeper on the English team for seventeen out of the past twenty years?”

“Of course, it might just have something to do with the fact that both my father and uncle are on the selection committee for the national team,” she added with a meaningful wink.

“Well I’m not interested in the Montrose Magpies – or in getting on any team by anything but my own talent,” said Ron proudly. “I’d rather play for the Chudley Cannons anyway.”

“Oh well, you better just keep your fingers crossed and hope for the best then,” quipped Pansy, before continuing on in a more serious tone. “You know, you chose the wrong friends when you came to Hogwarts, Ron – and the reality is that they won’t be here for much longer – you are soon going to be all alone. Granger will be gone with the rest of the Mudbloods at the end of term and Potter’s luck can’t last forever, there is nothing and no one left now who can save him from his fate.”

“Well, I’m not about to abandon Harry,” avowed Ron determinedly.

“Ha!” scoffed Pansy, deciding to try a different tack. “But he’s already abandoned you – and so has Granger. They’ve both turned their backs on you and are cuddling up to Godfry.”

“That’s not true!” yelled Ron. But no matter how hard he yelled, he couldn’t overcome the thought that Pansy was dead right.

“Look at the thanks you get for all you’ve done for the pair of them,” continued Pansy, sensing that she had Ron on her hook at last. “You’ve stood beside them and fought for them for five years. Then ‘Slick Rick’ suddenly shows up and worms his way into the ‘Dream Team’ – and pushes you out.”

“Who does Potter listen to?” challenged Pansy, raising an eyebrow. “You or him? It’s obvious that Potter doesn’t trust you any more. Godfry has turned him against you.”

“And as for Granger, well, she’s just throwing herself at him,” added Pansy, hitting pay dirt. “Don’t worry, I know how much you fancy that worthless little Mud ... err ... Muggle. But since ‘Slick Rick’ showed up on the scene, you haven’t stood a chance with her and you know it. I’ve seen them ducking into broom closets and empty classrooms, why —”

“What?” Ron ejaculated.

“Oh, come on,” said Pansy, “are you blind – or just unwilling to see the truth? Don’t you know what that pair get up to – right under your very nose?”

Ron fumed in silence, trying to contain the unpleasant visions and emotions that Pansy had brought boiling to the surface. She had just verbalised his own suspicions and there was nothing he could counter with. “Well thanks for enlightening me,” said Ron. “You’ve really made my day.”

He turned to leave, not knowing if he could hold his feelings in for much longer, and he was damned if he was going to let a Slytherin see him cry. “Wait,” said Pansy, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder, to stop him. “You don’t have to put up with that git Rick, if you don’t want to; you could help to get him out of the way, you know.”

“What?” said Ron, suddenly turning. “Help who?”

“Let’s just say that that you’re not the only one at Hogwarts with their nose out of joint over Rick Godfry. He’s made a lot of enemies in Slytherin, and almost every wizard in this school is sick to death of the way all the witches swoon over him. Why, I’m one of the few witches who can see right through that charming, phoney facade,” said Pansy, lying through her teeth.

“So what are you planning to do about him?” asked Ron, fearing that Pansy was trying to drag him into a murder plot. As much as he hated Godfry, he would never get involved in anything like that.

“Oh, don’t worry,” replied Pansy, sensing his nervousness. “Nothing too drastic. We just want him out of here – and fast. The plan is to rough him up a bit with a few hexes, let him know that he’s no longer welcome at Hogwarts and then Portkey him to somewhere in deepest, darkest Africa, far away from civilization – without his wand, of course,” added Pansy with an evil grin on her face.

“In the unlikely event that he’s stupid enough to try returning to Hogwarts,” said Pansy, “which would take him weeks, Umbridge would just expel him for having left the school without permission. She hates him and wouldn’t believe a word of it, if he tried telling her what had really happened. The plan is perfect,” gloated Pansy.

“So why are you telling me all this?” asked Ron.

“Well, you must have noticed,” explained Pansy, “that Godfrey is rather powerful and he seems to have some kind of sixth sense, so the whole plan hinges on catching him unawares with a Stunning Spell. And the safest way of doing that is to catch him in his sleep.”

“Oh, no,” protested Ron, holding up his hands in front of him. “I’m not trying that. You’re right about him having a sixth sense and I’m not sneaking up on him, even if he is asleep – or pretending to be.”

“Calm down Ron,” said Pansy, “I’m not asking you to stun him. All I’m asking you to do is to help me get into your dormitory so that I can do it. I’ll be under an invisibility cloak, so I won’t be seen. I’ve learnt a silent Stunning Spell; no one will even wake up – especially Godfrey. Then I’ll throw another invisibility cloak over him and levitate him out – you’ll never see him again.”

“Wait,” said Ron, the penny finally dropping, “you want me to give you the password to the Gryffindor common room, right?”

“Obviously,” said Pansy, “how else can I get to your dormitory?”

“And how do I know that you – or anyone else for that matter – won’t just attack Harry or me or anyone else?” demanded Ron.

“Because,” replied Pansy, “I swear a Wizard’s Oath – which you know can’t be broken – that I will be the only one entering your common room and that I won’t touch Potter or you or anyone else in your dormitory.”

Ron was clearly uneasy, so Pansy added, “Then tomorrow morning, you can change the password.”

But Ron was still uneasy about giving the Gryffindor password to a Slytherin. Sure he hated Godfry, but he was no traitor. “No,” he said finally after wrestling with his conflicting emotions. “I won’t do it.”

But Pansy had not given up yet. She was a master manipulator and she knew that she just about had him. “What if I offered you a small favour in return?” she asked.

“Like what?” asked Ron, suspiciously.

“Well I have no idea why, but you seem to fancy Granger. She’ll be out of Hogwarts at the end of this term and back with her Muggle family. I’m sure you know what kind of dangers she will face – she’ll be practically defenceless....”

“What are you trying to say ... are you threatening Hermione?” asked Ron angrily.

“Let’s just say that she’s made some enemies during her time at Hogwarts —” began Pansy.

“Like Malfoy,” spat Ron.

“Exactly,” agreed Pansy. “Enemies who might want to take revenge, once she’s away from here and vulnerable.”

“So what exactly is this favour you’re offering?” asked Ron.

“If you help us get rid of Godfry, we’ll leave your little Mud ... err, Muggle friend alone to enjoy living like a Muggle again in peace and quiet. It’s really a very simple choice,” said Pansy. “Who do you want to save, Godfry or Granger?”

“OK,” said Ron finally. “I’ll do it.”

Pansy smiled inwardly, she was very pleased with herself. It had just been so easy, and darling Draco was going to be so pleased with her.

Just after midnight, the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and a figure emerged from the Gryffindor common room hidden beneath an invisibility cloak. It gently guided its stunned victim, lying beneath another invisibility cloak. If the Fat Lady thought anything of it, she kept her thoughts to herself. In fact, she was quite used to having to open at all hours for invisible witches and wizards, and thought no more about it – it was all just part of the job.

Draco Malfoy waited impatiently in a small dungeon. He was really looking forward to this. He was feeling quite euphoric, actually. The events of the past few weeks had entirely rearranged the power structure at Hogwarts. The Purebloods were now on top – where they rightfully belonged. Slytherins, being the only purely Pureblood house, were therefore considered the Pureblood elite. Then there were the members of the Inquisitorial Squad. They were the elite of Slytherin.

Draco had just been appointed Commandant of the Inquisitorial Squad – his silver ‘I’ was bigger than everyone else’s. His father, as Executive Governor, just about owned the school and that pathetic Umbridge did exactly what she was told.

Next year, of course, Draco would be named Head Boy – but really, he was already, to all intents and purposes. Yes, life was very sweet right now. Draco felt powerful, like a king, and he was going to enjoy using his power.

The door to the dungeon swung open for a moment, and then closed again. Draco watched as Pansy Parkinson’s head suddenly appeared in mid-air followed by the rest of her. The smug grin on her face told him that her mission had been successful.

Pansy whipped away the other invisibility cloak from the prone figure, hovering beside her.

“Ah – Well if it isn’t my very favourite little Mudblood,” drawled Draco, observing his stunned bushy-haired victim.

“All right, you can go now, Pansy,” said Draco.

“What? – aren’t you even going to thank me, Draco?” asked Pansy, pouting. “It was my brilliant plan and my masterful manipulation of that Weasley jerk that got us the Gryffindor password – he was just like a puppet on a string. You owe me big-time, Draco.”

“Well I’ve got to admit, Pansy,” replied Draco, “you are one cunning, conniving witch, and I’m glad you’re on my side – you’re a credit to Slytherin.”

“Well thanks, Draco,” said Pansy. “It’s so nice to feel appreciated – but remember, we made a deal. I deliver Granger and you invite me as your date on the next Hogsmeade weekend.”

“OK, OK,” said Draco, becoming impatient. “You’ll get your date. Now get out of here! I’ve waited a long time for this moment and I don’t wish to wait any longer.”

“Enjoy yourself,” smirked Pansy as she left the dungeon. Much as she disliked the little know-it-all Mudblood, she did not want to think about what was about to happen to her. Pansy was a Pureblood to her bones, she understood that power was everything, and Draco had it – lots of it. In time, he would become one of the most socially and politically powerful wizards, and she was planning to share that power with him.

Pansy had lots of cunning plans, but her ultimate plan, was to become the next Mrs. Malfoy. She wasn’t about to let soft-heartedness or scruples get in her way – she was a witch with a mission.

Draco, meanwhile, had locked the dungeon door and placed a silencing charm on the dungeon. "Finite Incantatum," he said pointing his wand at Hermione. She immediately fell, unconscious, to the hard dungeon floor as the Levitation Spell was removed.

Not taking any chances, Draco magically chained Hermione to the dungeon wall before removing the Stunning Spell, saying "Ennervate."

Hermione opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was Malfoy leaning back on a chair a few feet in front of her, leering. She tried to move, but couldn't; then she saw that she was chained to the dungeon wall by her wrists and ankles. She shivered in her thin pyjamas. Surely she must be dreaming, the last thing she could recall was climbing into her snug four-poster bed and going to sleep. This must be some kind of nightmare, she thought.

Draco's heart was thumping in his chest, now he understood how it felt to be a Death Eater, closing in on some helpless victim. The adrenalin was surging through his veins. The feeling of power was intoxicating. He was going to take this nice and slowly – enjoy every moment of it.

"I hope you're afraid, Mudblood," he said. "You ought to be – very afraid."

Hermione realised, with absolute certainty, that this was no dream. It was real. Fear, like she had never felt in her life, twisted her stomach into a tight knot; she had difficulty breathing; her whole body was tense with terror. She kept silent.

"Well, well," sneered Draco. "The little know-it-all Mudblood who can never keep her foul mouth shut, seems lost for words. Well that's fine with me – I didn't bring you here for a friendly chat, you know."

"What did you bring me here for?" asked Hermione nervously.

"Guess," said Draco grinning evilly.

Hermione stayed quiet, she didn't want to think about it. Her sense of foreboding was rapidly increasing.

"You know, I've hated you since the day you arrived at this school, you uppity little Mudblood. Thinking that memorising a bunch of spells and reading every book in the library would make you a witch – put you on a par with us Purebloods."

"You think you're so clever, because you always come top of everything," he said getting angry, his voice growing gradually louder. "Well it's not your place to come top of anything. For five years I've had to listen to my father's lectures about how he was always top of every subject. About how a Malfoy must always come first. About how disgraceful it was that I allowed myself to be bettered by a Mudblood." Draco was livid with fury by now, his face red and blotchy.

"Well it's payback time, little Miss Mudblood," he said rising to his feet. When I'm finished with you, you won't be good for anything, ever again. Not for you dear little friend Potty – or maybe it's that upstart Godfry now – he's probably another Mudblood."

"But don't be concerned for your future, you didn't have one anyway. I mean you didn't really think that the Dark Lord would allow Mudblood filth like you to survive? Once all you Mudbloods are thrown out of Hogwarts, you'll be defenceless, easy prey – and pleasure – for his Death Eaters."

"I'll be doing you a favour," said Draco in a sinister tone. "You should be grateful. I'm going to save you from all that. You see, you won't be leaving this dungeon alive."

Hermione froze in fear at Malfoy's words. They weren't just idle threats. When he mentioned Rick, she thought to herself: Oh Rick, Rick! Where are you now, when I need you?

"But before I finish you off, I'm going to have a little fun with you, Mudblood!" said Draco coming closer. "I'm going to teach you your last lesson at Hogwarts – although it should have been your first. I'm going to teach you your place. I'm going to teach you who's in charge here, and exactly what little Mudbloods like you are good for."

He raised his wand, grinning. "Why don't you beg me for mercy, Mudblood? It won't do you any good, but it might amuse me."

Hermione knew that this was the end, there was no hope left. She was helpless. Malfoy would take whatever terrible revenge on her he pleased, and then he would kill her. Well, she was not going to go down grovelling before him.

"You're very brave, Malfoy," she said, "with me chained helplessly to the wall and you with your wand – that's hardly fair."

"We Malfoys don't play fair," he smiled wickedly. "We play to win – and we always win, in the end."

"I always knew you were evil, Malfoy. But I never imagined that even you, were capable of committing murder, in cold blood. When you attempted to poison Harry – and me – you were obviously following orders from your father, and Voldemort. But this is different – this is simply for your own twisted pleasure. Have you not a trace of humanity in you?"

"You just don't get it, do you, Mudblood?" sneered Malfoy. "You Mudbloods aren't like us – you're vermin. Killing you isn't murder, it's just pest control. We Purebloods, are a higher species – you're merely our quarry. Killing you isn't murder, it's sport."

"You're a —" But Hermione never got to tell Draco what he was. The door was blown off of its hinges and in the doorway, standing in his pyjamas, was an enraged Rick. Draco didn't see him. He didn't have time to turn before the curse hit him. He was lifted from his feet and hurled unconscious against the dungeon wall.

Rick walked over to Hermione and making her chains disappear, lifted her into his arms. He didn't use his wand – in fact he'd forgotten it in his haste to get to her. Hermione fainted in his arms. Rick wondered if he could just Apparate with her back to the Gryffindor common room. He was fairly sure that he could Apparate another person with him, but he was worried that the Hogwarts anti-Apparition

Wards would prevent him from doing it in the castle. The last thing he wanted was to splinch Hermione, she had suffered enough already.

So Rick decided to do it the slow way, carrying Hermione, lightened by a Levitation Charm, back to Gryffindor Tower in his arms. He had considered taking her to Madam Pomfrey. But Hogwarts had become so insecure that he didn't want to leave her unprotected in the hospital wing. Not that Draco Malfoy would be causing any further trouble tonight.

When he reached the common room, Rick placed her carefully on a couch by the fire, waving a hand at it to make it roar into life. He Summoned a blanket from his bed to wrap her in, and a robe for himself.

Rick decided it would be better to wait for Hermione to regain consciousness naturally, rather than Ennervate her. He could sense her fear and he knew that she must be traumatised, even though it appeared that he'd gotten to her in time, before she'd been physically harmed.

When Hermione opened her eyes, she saw that she was sitting in the Gryffindor common room, with Rick beside her. She threw her arms around him and began heaving great sobs on his shoulder.

Rick held her. He directed thoughts of calm and comfort towards her. Maybe it's time, he thought, to let loose the feelings I've been holding back for so long. He knew it was what Hermione needed now, to recover from the trauma she was suffering.

Hermione felt the loving feelings washing over her. They felt so warm, making her feel safe and secure. They drove out all the fear and terror that she had been feeling. She didn't really understand what it was, but she knew that it was coming from Rick and she wanted to let it to fill her, suffuse her, and take away all the pain and hurt.

They sat hugging like that for a long time, without speaking. Hermione could still remember all the events in the dungeon with Malfoy, but now, they didn't seem to touch her anymore.

Finally, she said, "You saved me, Rick – again."

He smiled at her and simply said, "You called me, and I came."

"I called you?" she asked.

"Yes," smiled Rick. "I was asleep when I heard you call out 'Oh Rick, Rick! Where are you now, when I need you' – so I came."

"But Rick, that's not possible," said Hermione, feeling confused. "I mean, yes I did say that – or think it to myself at least, but you had blown open the door of the dungeon less than a minute afterwards. I mean, how could you have heard my thoughts in your sleep? And how could you have known where I was? And how could you have gotten there so fast?" she asked.

"I was in a hurry," he grinned. In fact, as soon as Rick was awoken from his sleep by Hermione's plea for help, he had immediately projected his 'Marauders Map' and checked her dormitory – but she wasn't there. So he started searching for her. It didn't take long, because he began at the Slytherin common room, and the dungeon where Draco was holding her was nearby.

Before Hermione could demand a proper explanation, however, Ron came down the stairs, and spotting them together on the couch, began yelling at Hermione.

"Hermione, what the hell do you think you're doing down here with him? You've got to go back to your dorm, now! It's not safe to be here, with him! He's ... he's, putting you in danger! I can't explain it, but it's not safe.

Casting pleadingly looks at her, Ron implored, "Please get away from him and go to your dorm. Please, just trust me and go!"

"Ron," sighed Hermione, "when are you going to stop this rubbish about Rick? He just saved my life – he saved me from Draco Malfoy."

"What are you talking about?" asked Ron, becoming uneasy.

“I don’t know how he got me there,” said Hermione. “One minute, I was asleep in my bed, the next I was in a dungeon, chained to a wall, with Malfoy saying he was going to do all sorts of horrible things to me, and then kill me. If Rick hadn’t rescued me I would probably be dead by now – or at least praying that death would come soon,” she said, bursting into tears as the memories came flooding back.

“Malfoy ... he, he didn’t do anything to you did he, Hermione?” Ron asked desperately.

“No,” said Hermione, through her tears. “Rick arrived just in time. I don’t even want to think about what would have happened, if, if —” But she couldn’t carry on.

Rick wrapped his arms around her, directing loving feelings towards her again. While Hermione had been talking, Rick had been probing Ron’s mind; he now knew the full story.

Ron was distraught. He knew exactly how Hermione had ended up in the dungeon. But how could Pansy have broken her Wizard’s Oath? he wondered. She said ‘I won’t touch Potter, or you, or anyone else in your dormitory.’

Of course – she didn’t say anything about anyone else, or any other dorms. The plan had been to take Hermione all along – what a fool I was. Those Slytherins are so sneaky – and Pansy Parkinson has to be the sneakiest Slytherin of them all.

Hermione had stopped her crying now. Rick’s ‘treatment’ had done the job again.

Rick stared deeply into Ron’s eyes and said, “Maybe it’s time for a confession, Ron, and an apology; not just to Hermione, but to me too.”

“What are you t-talking about?” said Ron, trying to look away.

“Do you want to confess the whole story to Hermione, or shall I tell her who betrayed her?” asked Rick.

“But I didn’t mean to betray her!” cried Ron in despair. “Pansy was meant to take ...”

“Me,” said Rick with a wry grin. “Pansy used your jealousy and hatred of me to make you do something that you would never have done if you were thinking clearly. Take a good look at yourself, Ron, and see where your hatred and jealousy have gotten you, and how they allowed you to be duped by your worst enemies.”

“What’s this all about?” demanded Hermione, not being privy to the contents of Ron’s mind (like Rick – and Ron himself).

“Come on, Ron,” said Rick. “Confession is good for the soul. Confess, and you never know, you might be forgiven.”

Ron reluctantly told the whole sordid story, of how Pansy had tricked him. When he had finished, he begged Hermione to forgive him. “You know, I refused everything she tried to tempt me with. It was only when she said that your life would be spared, that I finally agreed.”

“Oh, Ron,” said Hermione getting up and throwing her arms around him. “I know you wanted to save me, and I know your intentions were good, but can’t you see how Pansy used your hatred of Rick to fool you?”

“No,” said Ron, who still, couldn’t see it.

“Ron,” said Hermione. “You’ve got a brilliant mind. You’re unbeatable at wizard chess because you can think so logically. But sometimes you just get some idea about something, or a prejudice against someone, and then you totally lose the ability to be rational about it.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with Pansy and —” objected Ron, not wanting to concede the truth of which Hermione had just spoken.

“What exactly was there to guarantee that I’d be spared, if you gave Pansy the password?” interrupted Hermione. “Did she swear a Wizard’s Oath on that? Did you consider that once inside the Gryffindor common room, Pansy could have taken whomever she

chose; except for you, Harry, Neville, Seamus and Dean, or that she could have done anything she liked to anyone?”

“Umm ... no,” conceded Ron.

“And do you know why you didn’t think about those things? Do you know why your powers of rational thought failed you? Because she wound you up about Rick. She played on your hatred and jealousy and as soon as those feelings got the better of you, you stopped thinking. Oh, Ron! Why can’t you see it?” she cried in desperation.

Ron didn’t say anything. He just stared at the floor, for a long time – but, finally, he did see it.

Please review ...

Chapter 8 - The Haunted House of Malfoy

Hermione wanted to stay in Gryffindor Tower the next morning – she felt too insecure to walk about the Hogwarts corridors. Rick was trying to convince her not to be intimidated by Malfoy. “You know how I heard you calling me last night from the dungeon?” he said. “Well, I think there’s some kind of, umm ... well ... link between us,” Rick said, blushing.

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

“I mean if you’re in trouble or need me, I think I’ll know it, and I’ll come to you. I mean ... that’s what happened last night. But after I had been ... err, comforting you and ... err, holding you, afterwards in the common room, it seemed like the link became a lot stronger.”

“What do you mean by a ‘link’?” asked Hermione, becoming curious. “Do you have this ‘link’ with Harry, or anyone else?”

“Well ... no,” said Rick. “Not that particular kind of link ... no.”

“What kind of link is it then?” persisted Hermione.

Rick sighed. This was getting difficult, for lots of reasons. “Hermione, I know this is going to sound stupid,” he said, “and I know how much it annoys you that I hide things from you, but the truth is that there are lots of things that even I don’t understand about myself.”

“So you don’t have any idea what this mysterious link is?” asked Hermione, getting annoyed at Rick’s typical evasiveness.

“Umm ... I do have an idea,” said Rick. “But I could be wrong, of course.”

“So tell me what your idea is then,” asked Hermione, finally pinning him down.

“I think it’s because of the way I ... err, feel about you ... I like you a lot, Hermione,” said Rick, blushing.

“Oh Rick,” said Hermione, not knowing what to say. She could have said that she liked him a lot too – because she did – but she wasn’t sure if she should say it. She wasn’t sure what to say or do about the way she felt about him. It was all so far removed from her experience – and reading.

Rick was in a real quandary. His feelings for Hermione were starting to overwhelm him. He found himself thinking about her all the time, wanting to get closer to her – a lot closer. He had to keep reminding himself, that he was here for a purpose, a very important purpose, and he could not afford to allow himself to be sidetracked.

The great witches and wizards of the Light had put a great deal of themselves into him. They had pinned their hopes for the future of Wizardkind on him. So much was riding on him; the future of so many good people. No, he didn’t have time for romance. He must not allow himself to become besotted with Hermione! He had to stay focused on his great task. He had to commit all his energies to the purpose for which he had been sent to this world. I have to be strong! Rick told himself firmly.

“Umm ... Hermione,” said Rick, trying to steer things away from the unfortunate direction they had taken. “If we all stay together – you, me, Harry and Ron – I think that after what happened last night, Ron may be willing to accept me now – we can all look after each other. I know you take a few classes that no one else does, but I can walk you to and from those classes and monitor you when you’re alone in them. If there are any problems, I can be there in a flash.”

“What do you mean by ‘be there in a flash’?” Suddenly, Hermione’s eyes opened wide, as she stared at Rick in astonishment. “You’ve been Apparating around Hogwarts, haven’t you? That’s how you beat us to Potions that first day, and how you got down to a dungeon which must be a good five minutes run from Gryffindor Tower in less than a minute! But Rick, I know that it’s simply not possible – it’s stated unequivocally in ‘Hogwarts, a History’ on page 678 and on —”

“- pages 978, 1205 and 1634,” added Rick with a grin. “Great book, but desperately in need of an update.”

Hermione was shocked, “How can you know all that? It took me four years to memorise that book and you’ve only been here four weeks ... and I’ve never even seen you reading it,” she demanded in righteous outrage.

“Good memory,” said Rick modestly. “Look Hermione, you’re a bit sharper than Harry and Ron – you seem to pick up stuff about me that they miss. I know it’s hard to hide things from your friends and I really don’t want to upset things between you, but could you please do me a favour and not tell them – or anyone – what you figure out about me ... err ... like the Apparating. Please, just trust me. The more I keep secret, the better it will be for all of us. OK?”

Hermione looked at Rick for a long time. The more she learned about him, the more mysteries there were ... it just seemed endless, trying to unravel him. Hermione could not stand mysteries, she had to know everything ... it was just so annoying! Rick was just so annoying! But she really liked him. Oh! What was she going to do?

“OK,” she said finally, “I’ll keep your secrets – for now. Come on, let’s grab Harry and Ron, and get some breakfast.”

Over the next few weeks, the Hogwarts students began to get organised. The Inquisitorial Squad had become a Pureblood vigilante gang, hexing anyone they didn’t like with impunity. Their favourite targets, of course, were the Muggle-borns. The resistance to them began with the sixth year Gryffindors. They started moving about the corridors in a single group wherever possible and always made certain that any likely targets amongst them, like Hermione and Dean Thomas – also Muggle-born – were never alone.

Rick was happy to see Harry come out of his shell and get involved. At last, Harry had found something he could do, to defy his enemies, instead of just sitting and waiting for them to attack. Ron was also active in the resistance; he was their logistics expert. He analysed the class timetables of each year and helped to organise them to move about in groups to protect themselves, especially the Muggle-borns.

Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, inspired by the resistance shown by the Gryffindors to Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherin thugs, followed the Gryffindor lead. They emulated Ron's strategy of forming protective groups at each year level when moving around the castle.

Most of the non-Slytherin Purebloods had not shared in the Slytherins' delight at Lucius Malfoy's plans for Hogwarts. They might be proud of their Pureblood heritage, but that didn't make them Pureblood racists. Not all of the Slytherins were Pureblood racists either, but they were outnumbered by their housemates and had to at least pay lip service to the Pureblood Power ideology.

Hogwarts, under Albus Dumbledore, had nurtured an attitude of tolerance. Witches and wizards were judged not by their blood or their ancestors, but by what they made of themselves. What was important, was their own personal qualities, and the magical powers they developed. For this reason, most of the students did not easily succumb to the influence of Umbridge and Lucius Malfoy.

The students were not alone. Their Professors were as supportive and protective as possible. They were all extremely upset with the new regime under Umbridge and Lucius Malfoy, but they couldn't act too overtly against them, for fear of being dismissed, and thus leaving their students even more vulnerable.

Professor McGonagall, however, didn't need to be careful; she was only there until a replacement Transfiguration teacher could be found. She was a very powerful witch and as long as she remained at Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy and his fellow thugs wouldn't dare try anything when she was around. McGonagall was proud of the Hogwarts students, at the way they were all standing up to the insufferable Umbridge and her Inquisitorial Squad. Not that Umbridge was doing very much herself. She wasn't interfering or bombarding them with Educational Decrees, as she had done the previous year. She seemed to be keeping a low profile and leaving the Inquisitorial Squad a free hand at their bullying.

Harry Potter had become the leader and figurehead of the resistance. The other students, not only the Gryffindors, looked up to him and drew strength from his defiant example. They all knew that he was

marked and that his future was bleak, that the odds were heavily stacked against him – if he wasn't giving up, then neither were they.

The student resistance was so strong now, with Gryffindors, Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs united against the Inquisitorial Squad, that they could no longer attack openly in the corridors of Hogwarts as they would soon be heavily outnumbered. They resorted instead, to sneak attacks.

One Monday morning, when Harry, Hermione, Rick and Dean were on their way down to Snape's dungeon for Potions, Rick, scanning ahead as usual, spotted an ambush. There were four of them, two on each side of the corridor, concealed behind heavy drapes. Rick whispered to the others to dive when he told them. At his signal, the four Gryffindors hit the ground. The hexes flung by the Inquisitorial Squad flew over them hitting the two on the opposite side. Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini didn't make it to Potions that day. They spent the next two days in the hospital wing recovering from the messes that they had made of each other.

The next ambush was better planned. Draco and his thugs – there were seven of them this time – were all on the same side of the corridor, again concealed behind a heavy drape. The corridor lay between Gryffindor Tower and the Great Hall. The plan was to lay some hexes on Potter and his 'fan club' on the way to breakfast. They couldn't use anything lethal, like the Unforgivable Curses so openly, but they had some very nasty hexes ready for them.

Rick almost missed them, as he approached with the other sixth year Gryffindors. He was thinking about Hermione – again – instead of staying focused, and checking what lay ahead. Harry was in the lead, when Draco and his gang jumped out from their hiding place, hurling hexes furiously.

Rick barely managed to get a Reflecting Shield up in time – it was a very close call. The Gryffindors reacted quickly, turning and pointing their wands at their attackers. But before they could cast a curse in anger, the members of the Inquisitorial Squad were writhing in agony on the floor. They were experiencing the effects of their own nasty

hexes, hurled back at them, with double the original power, by Rick's Reflecting Shield.

The Gryffindors looked at each other in confusion, wondering who had made such a mess of Malfoy and his mates. Harry and Ron were both pretty sure that Rick must have done it, but they knew by now to keep quiet. Hermione caught Rick's eye, before he looked innocently down at the floor – she had no doubt at all.

Rick, however, was feeling anything but innocent. Damn it! he thought. I have to stop thinking about Hermione all the time! This is not what I'm here for! The next time, it could cost Harry his life. I have to get Hermione out of my head! I just have too! he told himself. But somehow, he didn't feel very convinced. For all his awesome magical powers, Rick was just like any other sixteen year old boy in love. He might know what he should do, but overcoming his powerful emotions and doing it, was another matter entirely.

Draco Malfoy and his six friends spent the rest of the week in the hospital wing. He couldn't figure out how Potter and his 'fan club' had managed to foil his attack yet again. He was becoming afraid of their power and decided against further attacks – on them at least.

Draco never found out who had attacked him that night down in the dungeon, as he was about to take his revenge upon the Mudblood Granger. He was pretty sure it must have been Potter. There had probably been a whole bunch of them.

Weasley obviously wasn't as stupid as he looked, he thought – not that that was possible, mind you. He must have alerted the others to what Pansy was up to. Potter was probably waiting under his own invisibility cloak when she entered their common room. Damn Pansy! He just couldn't rely on anyone to do anything properly, not even Pansy with all her sly cunning. He had given her a tongue lashing and had called off the date to Hogsmeade.

Still, his father and the Dark Lord had plans for Potter – Final Plans. Yes, maybe he would leave Potter for them to deal with. Once Potter

was safely out of the way, it would be open season for the Inquisitorial Squad. In the mean time, he could at least enjoy taunting Potty and his pathetic little fan club – that was a pleasure he excelled in.

The following week, the Gryffindor and Slytherin sixth years were making their way towards Hagrid's hut for Care of Magical Creatures, which they still took together, much to their mutual dislike.

Hagrid had been replaced by Professor Grubbly-Plank, soon after Umbridge's arrival. But Care of Magical Creatures was still held outside Hagrid's hut as it was near to the magical creature enclosures.

"Well, if it isn't little Pot-head with his Mudblood trash," sneered Draco. "Be sure to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine – while you still can, that is," he said with an evil laugh.

Ron was already reaching for his wand, but Rick and Harry grabbed him, before he could attack Draco.

"Ron," said Hermione, with a calm dignity, "don't lower yourself to Malfoy's level. Leave him alone in the gutter where he belongs." The Gryffindors all sniggered at Draco.

"Brave words, filthy Mudblood. Keep up your mindless ranting while you can – because you haven't got much longer," Draco snarled back at her in anger.

Hermione turned and glared at him hard. "You don't scare me, Malfoy. You're just a little wimp."

"Oh, but it's the Dark Lord that you should be afraid of, little Mudblood – very, very, afraid," he added darkly with a horrible sneer on his face. "You won't escape your fate, you'll get what you deserve."

Hermione was not going to be intimidated by Malfoy. "Well I'm not scared of your 'Dark Lord'," she said, raising her chin. "As far as I'm concerned, your 'Dark Lord' is nothing but a 'Dark Fraud'."

Draco gasped. He was outraged to hear his master insulted like this. The Slytherins were all in shock; even some of the Gryffindors felt uncomfortable. It was as if Hermione had broken some sacred taboo.

But Harry was delighted with the effect of Hermione's words on Malfoy.

"Hermione's right, he's nothing but a fraud and all you brave Purebloods cower before him like timid little mice," he said derisively.

"Shut-up Potter," screamed Draco, appalled at this sacrilege. "You don't even know what you're talking about."

"Oh, but I do," said Harry. Finally, overcoming the fear of his memories, he continued. "I was there in the graveyard at Little Hangleton, at the end of fourth year, when Voldemort summoned his Death Eaters. Your father was there, Malfoy, and he was cringing and grovelling before Voldemort just like the rest of them. He's not even a Pureblood – did you know that? Voldemort – or Tom Riddle, I should say, that's his real name – had a Muggle father. He's a mixed-blood wizard. Under your father's reforms he wouldn't even be allowed into Hogwarts now. What a joke, and yet all his Pureblood Death Eaters bow down before him like slaves."

Malfoy remained silent with rage.

"Why, you're too scared to even say his name, aren't you?" teased Harry, enjoying himself. "Go on, Malfoy, say it ... it's Vol-de-mort. But he should be called 'Mouldy-pork', you know, I've seen him and that's what he looks like, a rancid maggot-infested blob of mouldy pork!"

Draco was too angry to speak for a few moments. "That's enough, Potter, you will pay for this," he finally said, trembling with rage.

"And what are you going to do about it?" asked Harry, stepping closer to him. "I know – why don't you challenge me to a Wizard Duel, to defend the honour of your precious 'Mouldy-pork'?"

"No, Harry," cried Hermione fearfully, "he'll cheat, you know he will."

“Oh no, he won’t,” said Ron. “This will be a formal Wizard Duel. It’s a kind of magical contract and it’s not possible to cheat. Right, I’m Harry’s second. Go on ferret-face, name your second. I’m really going to enjoy this.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “let’s see if you have the guts to face me in a fair fight, one on one, without Daddy Death Eater or your Inquisitorial Idiots to hide behind. Come on then, show us the Malfoy Pureblood Power,” he taunted.

Draco turned a ghastly white; he was trapped. There was no way he was going to face Potter in a fair fight. Everyone – Gryffindors and Slytherins were looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to respond to the challenge.

Finally, he thrust his chin arrogantly in the air, saying, “I’d like nothing better than the chance to finish you off, Potter – but someone else has already reserved that pleasure. Don’t worry, you won’t have long to wait,” he added, trying to hide his cowardice with his snide tone. But he wasn’t fooling anyone, not even the Slytherins.

The following evening as they were finishing their meal, Professor Umbridge appeared at the Gryffindor table. “Hem, hem,” she said. “Potter, I want to see you.”

“What ... what for?” asked Harry nervously.

“You’ll find out, don’t worry,” she said in a less than reassuring voice. “Hurry up and finish eating, I will be waiting for you through there,” she said, indicating the door to the room next to the teachers’ table, where Harry had gone after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. “Don’t keep me waiting,” she added, and turned to leave.

“Oh, Harry,” cried Hermione. “I don’t like this at all. I have a really bad feeling about it.”

“Yeah, me too,” added Ron. “Maybe we should all dash back to Gryffindor Tower, or find McGonagall or something.”

“I’ll just have to go,” said Harry. “There’s no escaping Umbridge in this castle – what will come, will come,” he said, trying to hide his fear and apprehension.

Harry wanted to put on a brave face for his friends, but he certainly didn’t feel very brave. He was filled with foreboding; events were spinning out of control. He gripped his wand through his robes, and giving Hermione and Ron one final glance, he walked off to meet Umbridge. Helplessly, they watched him until he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

The Headmistress was standing by the fire when Harry entered. “Ah, Potter,” she said disdainfully. “You know I did try to teach you some discipline last year, but unfortunately, you wouldn’t learn; you are still quite out of control.”

“Expelliarmus!” came the spell from behind Harry. His wand was ripped from his hand and he was thrown hard against the wall, falling in a heap on the floor.

Standing over him, pointing his wand down at him while tucking Harry’s wand into his robes, was Lucius Malfoy, looking extremely pleased with himself. At his side, stood a gloating Draco Malfoy.

“Thank you, Headmistress, you may go,” said Lucius, brusquely dismissing her. Umbridge uttered a small “hem, hem,” as she obediently left the room.

“Well, Potter, how nice to see you again,” purred Lucius, keeping his wand trained on Harry’s chest as he lay sprawled on the floor. “And I’m sure you can guess who else is very keen to see you ... again.”

“Father,” said Draco. “Can’t I have a little fun with him before you take him away? This is my last chance. I’ve wanted to use the Cruciatus

Curse on him for five years now – and anyway I need to practice it, before I receive my initiation from the Dark Lord.”

“As much as I’d like to indulge you and allow you a little sport, Draco,” his father replied, “the Dark Lord instructed that Potter is to be brought to him unharmed – and he is not lenient with those who disobey him. No, I won’t allow anything to spoil this – my moment of triumph.”

“This will be the highlight of my career as a Death Eater – handing our Lord his mortal enemy – the one who stands between him and Immortality,” he said, his voice rising in anticipation. “Oh yes, Draco,” he continued rapturously, “the Dark Lord will reward me with great power and privilege, and finally, I shall be his undisputed lieutenant. This will be remembered as one of the great events in the history of the Malfoys.”

At that moment, all the candles in the room spluttered and the fire died down, as a cold wave swept through the room. The candles and fire returned quickly to their normal state, but the cold shivery presence remained. Lucius looked about wildly, but there was nothing to see. “Who is that? Who are you? What are you?” he demanded.

“Why, a ghost of course,” replied a spectral rasping voice, which seemed to be coming from nowhere in particular, and yet from everywhere. Draco jumped behind his father in fright, clinging to his arm.

“Well I’m not afraid of ghosts,” spat Lucius. “I’m quite used to them, and anyway, you have no real power in the world of the living,” he added, turning his wand back on Harry. “Anyway, you don’t look like much of a ghost to me, I can’t even see you,” he added dismissively.

“Ah,” replied the ghost, “that’s because I am a very special ghost, and I have very special powers – even in the world of the living.”

“Whose ghost are you?” asked Lucius, beginning to lose a little of his confidence.

“The ghost of one of the Founders of this very school.”

“Which Founder?”

“From my voice, it should be obvious that it wasn’t a ‘Witch Founder’,” laughed the ghost, enjoying the pun. “So that leaves just two possibilities.”

“Salazar Slytherin?” asked Lucius hopefully.

“No, Godric Gryffindor – at your service.”

“Now look, I’m rather busy right now, I don’t have time for these games. Perhaps you would care to come back at a more convenient time,” said Lucius, anxious now that his great mission might be placed in jeopardy by this ghost or whatever it was.

“Well actually, this is a most convenient time – for me.”

“What exactly do you mean?” asked Lucius, attempting to sound more confident of the situation than in fact he felt.

“I mean, that I’ve come here expressly to prevent you from abducting one of my Gryffindors.”

“Well you can’t prevent me doing anything, no matter whose ghost you are – or claim to be. You have no power to interfere in our realm. Now be gone, before I teach you the consequences of meddling with a Malfoy!”

Harry, meanwhile, had sat up on the floor, attempting to figure out what was going on. Was it possible that this really was the ghost of Godric Gryffindor? Was there hope for him, yet?

“With what were you planning to ‘teach’ me?”

Lucius Malfoy stared in horror at his empty hand. “Where is my wand?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be needing it.”

Lucius immediately drew Harry's wand from his pocket, but before he could even point it at Harry, it flew up in the air and landed in Harry's hand.

Harry immediately pointed it at Draco and said "Expelliarmus." Draco flew back against the wall as Harry caught his flying wand, which he pocketed before getting up from the floor and pointing his wand menacingly at Lucius Malfoy.

"Well, it looks like there's been a bit of a glitch in your plans for this evening, Mr. Malfoy," grinned Harry.

"Well done, Harry, you're a credit to your house ... well, err, to my house really, but you can put your wand away for now. Why don't the three of you sit down and make yourselves comfortable; I thought we might have a little fireside chat."

Harry did as he was asked, but Lucius was making a dash for the door. He suddenly stopped and flew back through the air, landing neatly in an armchair by the fire. Draco, lying groggily on the floor where Harry's spell had thrown him, also came sailing through the air to land in the chair next to his father. They attempted to struggle out of their chairs at first, until they discovered that they couldn't.

"It's so very nice of you to join me, Lucius. You know, you should feel greatly honoured. You are one of the main reasons for my coming back to visit my 'old school' after these thousand years. I keep in touch with the other Founders, you know – well Rowena and Helga at least – Salazar is still a bit peeved about us ganging up on him over a difference of opinion – and keeps pretty much to himself – which suits the rest of us quite nicely."

"We three Founders are very concerned with what you and this chap Riddle are attempting to do to our school. So we decided that it's time to put a stop to it – and to you."

"Me? Are you going to kill me?" he asked in panic.

"No, no, that won't be necessary – and anyway, we're in no hurry for you to turn up in our realm – believe me. No, we had a bit of a think

about it and decided upon a suitable punishment for you. One that would fit your crimes – and ensure that you don't commit any more."

"And what punishment is that?" asked Lucius nervously, fearing that it might be some kind of super powerful Cruciatus Curse.

"Oh, it won't hurt a bit – 'Squibbus'. There, all done! I've just cast our new spell on you and you didn't feel a thing."

"What exactly is this spell?" asked Lucius nervously. "What does it do?"

"Oh, it's really rather clever," said the ghost happily. "It was Rowena's idea, she's such a brilliant witch, you know. It's called the 'Squibbus Spell' – but surely you can guess what it does."

"What?" shrieked Lucius in disbelief, trying, but failing to get up. "That's impossible! My Master spent years searching for such a spell and he assured me that it's not possible."

"No, it's not possible for your vile master, most fortunately. Nor is it possible for anyone in your realm. In fact, I believe that I am the only sentient being – or perhaps I should say sentient being –" he chortled, "who can perform this spell."

"I don't believe you, it's not possible," cried Lucius desperately, unwilling to allow himself to think the unthinkable.

"Well, to be perfectly honest, neither am I. You see, this is the very first time that it has ever been cast; you should feel greatly honoured, you know. Why, you'll probably be in all history books. You'll be famous – in a somewhat ignominious sort of way. But I'm very anxious to know if it's worked, so would you be kind enough to try some magic?"

Draco's wand floated out from Harry's robes and landed in his father's hand. He immediately pointed it at Harry and said "Crucio!"

Harry tensed up for a moment, but when nothing happened, he grinned at Lucius and said, "Not even an itchy nose."

Lucius panicked; he tried a Summoning Spell on a book, but it didn't come. He tried Lumos, but not a flicker came from the wand. Finally in desperation he tried Wingardium Leviosa on a piece of parchment, but it didn't budge.

"Wonderful, absolutely wonderful! It works perfectly! Rowena is so ingenious, don't you agree?" he said delightedly

"How long exactly, does this spell last for?" whispered Lucius fearfully.

"Forever! It's permanent, absolutely permanent! I couldn't reverse it, even if I wanted to. You, Mr. Malfoy, are a Squib!"

Lucius was totally stunned – his life was over. As the appalling reality sank in, his stiff upper lip began to quiver; the blood drained from his face – which turned a pallid white; his hands began trembling uncontrollably. This was, without question, the most terrible and shameful moment of his life. In one calamitous moment he had been reduced from a proud and powerful Pureblood, who stood at the pinnacle of Wizarding society, to a thing which he utterly despised, and loathed – a Squib!

"I know things must seem quite bad right now, but they could be a lot worse, you know."

"However do you mean?" mumbled Lucius. He had sunk into a deep depression, and was finding it difficult to think clearly. His mind wanted to shut down, to self-destruct, rather than acknowledge the terrible truth of the detestable thing that he had become.

"Well, you're a wealthy man Mr. Malfoy. I suggest that you convert some of your gold into Muggle money and disappear into some very obscure part of the Muggle world – like Mongolia."

"But why would I want to do that?" he asked in befuddlement.

"Well firstly, you're going to have to live in the Muggle world, you're a Squib now, remember.... Secondly, I believe that you have just failed your master in a most important mission, one that is very dear to his

heart – or whatever he has in lieu of one. He's not the forgiving type, I'm sure you've noticed. A quick painful death is probably the very best you could hope for. Thirdly, I believe that your master has a rather low opinion of Squibs – such as yourself – he and your (former) fellow Death Eaters plan to exterminate them, don't they?"

Lucius Malfoy cringed in fear, as the import of the ghost's words sank in.

"Yes, I would attempt to get very far away, and very fast, if I were you. But there is also another matter to consider. As I said, things could be worse, a lot worse."

"How?" asked Lucius morosely, unable to imagine how things could possibly get any worse than they were right now.

"How many centuries old is the Malfoy family?"

"We can trace our ancestors back to the time of Merlin."

"And Draco is the sole heir to the House of Malfoy?"

"Why, yes," replied Lucius, nervously.

"You see the Squibbus Curse not only renders the witch or wizard a Squib, it also guarantees that their future progeny will also be Squibs."

Both Malfoys fell silent, as the spectre of the end of the House of Malfoy loomed large, before them.

"If I were to Squib young Draco here, the House of Malfoy would become a house of Muggles – forever."

Lucius and Draco gasped in horror.

"But you can't do that! Draco hasn't done anything —"

"Oh, yes, but he has," replied the ghost. "I've been keeping an eye on events here at Hogwarts for some time now. Young Draco has been

bullying and leading attacks on other students, particularly the Muggle-born students. He attempted to fatally poison two of my Gryffindors, as you well know. He also recently attempted to take a most terrible revenge upon a Gryffindor witch.

“All such behaviour must end. If there is any recurrence of this kind of behaviour against any witch or wizard of any Hogwarts house, including his own, I will immediately Squib Draco. If he has anything at all to do with Voldemort or his Death Eaters, I will Squib him.

“The same goes for Mrs. Malfoy. She is to cut all ties with Voldemort and his Death Eaters. And if so much as another Malfoy Knut should end up in the Minister of Magic’s pockets or his Gringotts vault, both mother and son will share your fate. I do hope you understand me.”

The ghostly voice paused pointedly, to let the gravity of its words sink in, before continuing:

“Good, I think that concludes our conversation. Draco, you will need to escort your father back to Malfoy Manor so that he can arrange his affairs and be gone. He’ll need your help. Without magic, he won’t even be able to find his own house.

“And Draco, I’m sure that you would prefer to keep the somewhat ‘embarrassing’ events of tonight secret for as long as possible. Harry, I would also ask you to ensure that what has happened in this room tonight does not become common knowledge at Hogwarts.”

With that the ghost seemed to have gone. Draco and his father hurried quickly from the room, studiously avoiding Harry.

Ron and Hermione jumped up and ran over to Harry as he entered the Gryffindor common room. Hermione lunged at him, almost knocking him to the floor, as she threw her arms around him, hugging him desperately, tears of joy and relief running down her face.

Ron put an arm around Harry's shoulders, pulling him close. He, too, seemed close to tears. "You've no idea how worried we've been, mate," he said with feeling.

"Oh Harry, Harry," cried Hermione. "We were so afraid that we'd never see you again. It's been just awful waiting here. But you're OK," she said joyfully, dragging him over to their corner spot. "Tell us what happened."

As they were sitting down, Rick came down the stairs from the boys' dormitories, yawning.

"Where have you been?" asked Ron.

"Asleep," said Rick.

"But when I went up to the dorm looking for you, when we got back from dinner, you weren't there," said Ron.

"No, I dashed off to the library after dinner. I needed to look something up for our Potions assignment," explained Rick. "But I became really tired – Potions does that to me – so I came back for a nap. I saw you and Hermione sitting over here, but I went straight up to the dormitory, I was so tired. Why were you looking for me anyway?" he asked.

"Well because of Harry, of course," said Hermione. "Didn't you hear Umbridge tell Harry to meet her after the meal?" she asked.

"Err, no," said Rick, "I must have already gone to the library. What happened Harry?" he asked with concern.

Harry proceeded to tell them the whole unbelievable story of how Umbridge had merely been a decoy to allow Lucius Malfoy to stun him. It was his worst nightmare come true. Lucius Malfoy was to deliver him over to Voldemort. Then just when he had given up all hope, the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor came dramatically to his rescue.

Hermione, Ron, and Rick sat listening wordlessly, until he finished his incredible tale. Then there was silence.

Hermione was the first to speak. "What Lucius Malfoy said about ghosts having no real power in this realm is correct. All the books say the same thing. Their only means of interference is through threats and instilling fear, but they can't actually, physically do things. It's like they are not quite in the same dimension as us," she explained.

"Well, the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor was definitely in the same dimension as the Malfoys," grinned Harry. "No doubt about it. He said that he was a 'special' kind of ghost. Maybe there are different kinds – they may not all be like Nearly Headless Nick and Moaning Myrtle and the other ones around here that don't seem to do very much."

"It's true that there are different kinds," conceded Hermione, but I've never read anything about any ghost that could act in the world of the living."

"Hermione," smiled Rick, "when are you going to realise that just because a book says that something is impossible, it doesn't necessarily make it impossible? Books aren't infallible, you know."

"Yeah," agreed Ron, "I've been telling her that for years now. But you know, this is too good to be true – Lucius Malfoy, turned into a Squib! I can't think of anyone more deserving – I can't wait to tell my Dad!"

"You can't," said Harry. "The ghost asked me not to spread the news around, so we have to keep this secret to ourselves."

"Yes, he's right," said Hermione. "Ron, you're just going to have to control yourself and not taunt Malfoy about it. But don't worry," she grinned, "I expect he'll be on his best behaviour from now on."

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 9 - The Rise and Rise of the Resistance

Assisting his Squib father in beginning life as a Muggle was a most salutary lesson for Draco. The Malfoy family was at the pinnacle of the magical aristocracy. To be turned into a despised Squib with no more magic than a loathsome Muggle was the most shameful humiliation imaginable. Lucius Malfoy had sunk into a deep depression. He would never dare show his face in Wizarding society ever again. His own wife and son were embarrassed in his presence, and it was clear that they wanted him as far away as possible and as quickly as possible. Perhaps this odious and shameful calamity could be hushed up.

Narcissa Malfoy, fearful that Draco could suffer the same terrible fate as his father, instructed him forcefully to resign from the Inquisitorial Squad, break off friendships with anyone close to the Death Eaters, and to keep his nose clean and his head down. The very future of the Malfoy dynasty hung in the balance.

When he returned to Hogwarts, Draco was on his very best behaviour. He did exactly as his mother instructed. As a result, the Inquisitorial Squad lost much of its impetus. With Draco gone, it was just a tool for Umbridge to exert her authority, and the Slytherins had no more respect for her than anyone else in the school.

With Filch fired (because he was a Squib), Umbridge was now isolated. The teachers despised her and treated her as an unwanted and superfluous imposition forced upon them by Fudge. She soon got the message and began to keep a low profile – which wasn't difficult – with her short and dumpy shape, she was already pretty low to the ground.

She thought she had seen the last of Potter when she had left him with Lucius Malfoy that evening. But when Lucius Malfoy disappeared instead of Potter, she became anxious and didn't know what to think. When Draco returned to school after 'seeing off' his father, she asked him where his father was. Draco had mumbled something about his father taking a long holiday and that she should wait from him to contact her. She waited a long time....

Despite his disappearance, Lucius Malfoy's Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-seven was still hanging over the Hogwarts students, as the end of term drew near. According to article two, Muggle-born students would not be allowed to return to school after the Christmas break.

"We have to act now," said Hermione one night, as she sat with Harry, Ron and Rick in the common room.

"But what can we do?" asked Harry. "Even with Lucius Malfoy gone, Fudge will still be sucking up to Voldemort's Death Eaters, and they'll insist that he go ahead with Malfoy's reforms."

"'Student Power'," said Hermione, as if it was obvious. Of course it wasn't. However, Hermione was happy to explain. Opening her bag she pulled out a parchment and began reading from it.

"We, the Students Collective for the Defence of the Hogwarts Charter, hereby make the following demands upon the Minister of Magic:

1. That Professor Albus Dumbledore be immediately re-instated as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.
2. That all dismissed Hogwarts staff be returned to their former positions immediately.
3. That the position of Executive Governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry be dissolved forthwith.
4. That the duly appointed Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Board of Governors be reconvened.
5. That the Charter of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and its Articles of Convocation and Suffrage remain unaltered.
6. That Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-six and Special Educational Decree Number Thirty-seven be revoked in full."

“Wow, Hermione,” said Ron, impressed, “you could sure give that git Percy a run for his money in the flowery speech department.”

“It’s got to be like that – official-sounding,” said Harry, obviously also impressed. “So what do we do now?”

“Well, this is the master parchment,” said Hermione, indicating the document she had been reading from, “and these are magical copies.” She pulled a bundle of scrolls from her bag. “We’ll circulate them throughout the school and try to get as many students as possible to sign. Each signature placed on a copy will magically appear on the master parchment.”

“Well I wouldn’t bother with the Slytherins,” said Ron.

“Oh, yes we will,” said Hermione. “Don’t be such a house-chauvinist, Ron.”

“You may be surprised,” added Rick. “Without Malfoy and his band of thugs bullying them, some of them might sign.”

The following morning, while waiting for Professor McGonagall to arrive in their Transfiguration class, Hermione passed a magical copy of her petition to Padma Patil to circulate in Ravenclaw.

“May I please see what you have there, Miss Granger?” asked a curious Professor McGonagall, upon entering the classroom. Hermione handed the parchment to the Transfiguration Professor, who studied it carefully.

Finally, she said with a small smile, “Might I suggest one minor alteration to your excellent document, Miss Granger?”

Hermione was taken aback, she had not known what to expect. “Why ... why certainly, Professor,” she stammered.

“At the beginning, after the words ‘Students Collective for the Defence of the Hogwarts Charter’, please insert the words ‘and

Hogwarts Professors’.” Returning the parchment to a very flabbergasted Hermione, she added, “If you would be so good as to drop an amended copy off to my study, it will be my great pleasure to circulate it in the staff room.”

The petition was a huge success. Harry became the ambassador in publicising it and encouraging students to sign. For once in his life, he found his fame and notoriety a benefit – rather than a curse. He was admired throughout the school for his bravery, and he seemed to inspire bravery in others. It took a certain amount of bravery to put your name on a petition defying the Ministry of Magic in such tyrannical times as these.

Much to Ron’s surprise, almost half the Slytherins signed the petition. In the other houses, support was unanimous. All the Professors added their names, even Professor Snape. At first he wasn’t going to sign – after all, he was supposed to be a Death Eater. But then, he reasoned, that since he was also supposed to be spying for Voldemort and feigning allegiance to Dumbledore, it would be quite in keeping with his ‘pretence’ ... but the main reason was that he despised Umbridge to the depths of his soul.

Everyone was gathered in the Great Hall for Friday evening’s meal. Hermione and Harry rose from their seats and walked side by side to the teachers’ table, stopping opposite the Headmistress. The usual chatter and noise of mealtime died away as students nudged one other. It was clear that they were about to deliver the petition.

At the teachers’ table, all the professors had stopped eating and turned expectantly towards Umbridge, who was the last to notice Harry and Hermione standing before her. When she did notice them, she also saw that everyone in the Great Hall was staring at her in anticipation. She began to feel nervous. She didn’t know what was going on, but it was obvious that everyone else did.

“Hem, hem ... What are you doing? Who gave you permission to interrupt my meal?” She tried to sound annoyed, but her unease was apparent.

Harry handed the petition to her. It was tied with a bright red ribbon. He and Hermione looked at her expectantly. In fact, everyone in the Great Hall was staring at her expectantly. She had a bad feeling about this and decided it would be safer not to read it now, in front of the whole school. She put it down, unopened, upon the table and with a dismissive wave of her hand ordered Harry and Hermione back to their table immediately.

They didn't move. "You have to read it, Headmistress," said Hermione in a clear voice that rang through the hall.

"How dare you tell me what to do, you little upstart!" she shrieked.

"No, you don't understand, it's a Magical Petition, you have to read it," explained Hermione.

"I don't care what it is ... return to your table immediately, the pair of you. I've never seen such impertinence —" As she yelled at them, the Headmistress was attempting to stuff the petition in her robes, but it leapt from her hands, magically unfurled itself, and in a loud and officious voice that would have done Percy Weasley proud, proceeded to read out its list of demands for all the hall to hear.

When it had finished, it rolled itself up with a flourish, and then dropped back onto the table. All the students who had signed the petition began clapping loudly. The noise was tumultuous. The Headmistress sat stony-faced, becoming redder and redder. Harry and Hermione had returned to their places. Hermione was looking very pleased with herself. The enchanted petition had put on quite a performance – and it wasn't over yet.

When the noise died away, everyone in the hall was staring at Umbridge, awaiting her reaction. She rose to her feet, attempting, but failing, to exude authority as she drew herself up to her full four foot something. She was quite stunned and totally at a loss for words. She simply said, "This is what I think of your impudence!" She ripped off the red ribbon, unfurled the petition, and then proceeded to tear it to pieces. A gasp ran through the Great Hall – most of the students looked horrified, but not Hermione – she was grinning.

Before the pieces of the shredded parchment had landed on the table, they transformed themselves into the caricature of a giant face. It was a very imposing face; a very intimidating face. It turned, red with fury, upon the Headmistress and screamed at her in a deafening, accusing voice, which reverberated throughout the hall.

“I am a Magical Petition ... and I am addressed to the Minister of Magic – not to you – you stupid witch. How dare you presume to destroy me? I have been entrusted into your care – thus you are contractually obliged to deliver me to the Addressee – namely the Minister of Magic – with all due haste. Those who are unwise enough to attempt evasion will find that the consequences can be very ... itchy.”

With that, the terrible red face transformed back into an innocuous scroll, once more bound with a bright red ribbon.

The Headmistress was suddenly overcome by a fearful fit of itching – she began scratching herself in all sorts of places. It was most undignified. The students began howling with laughter while their Professors attempted to restrain their equal glee at her obvious discomfort and embarrassment. Finally, the Headmistress grabbed the petition in one hand and ran from the hall, flailing at her backside with the other, trying to relieve the terrible torment. It can be safely assumed that Cornelius Fudge was in possession of the petition very soon afterwards.

“Fudge is just ignoring our petition. It’s obvious! We need to escalate things,” said Hermione one evening, a week after their petition had been delivered to the Headmistress. No response had been received from the Minister of Magic and the Headmistress was trying to act as if the whole embarrassing episode in the Great Hall had never happened.

“What did you have in mind?” asked Harry, certain that Hermione had it all figured out – she did.

“We’ll go on strike, and refuse to attend classes until Fudge addresses our petition. If he doesn’t agree to meet each and every one of our demands by the end of term, then none of us will return to school after Christmas. Fudge will have no option but to close Hogwarts!”

Harry again took the role of ambassador, though this time it was more like that of a union organiser. All the students who had signed the petition agreed to join the strike. In fact, due to some encouragement by a certain ghost, Draco Malfoy decided to join them. He brought many other Slytherins who had also not signed the petition with him. Only a handful, the children of dyed in the wool Death Eaters, acting under parental instruction, had refused to join. The Hogwarts professors all wholeheartedly agreed to support the strike action.

The Headmistress seemed to be the only one in the school who didn’t know what was going on – until one Sunday evening in the Great Hall when Harry and Hermione approached the teachers’ table, once more bearing a parchment. Having learned her lesson, the Headmistress gingerly took it from them and opened it. It was in fact a magical announcement, which proceeded to announce itself.

“We, the Students Collective for the Defence of the Hogwarts Charter, do hereby serve notice that pursuant to our Petition to the Minister of Magic and the action of said Minister of Magic in ignoring our just demands, we hereby take strike action.

“We hereby serve notice that we will attend no further classes until our demands have been met in full.

“We hereby serve notice that should our demands not be met in full by the end of term, that none of us shall return to Hogwarts until such time as they are met in full.”

The parchment then rolled itself up and floated into the Headmistress’ hand. She immediately jumped to her feet and rushed from the hall, obviously keen to deliver it to the Minister without delay.

For the next three days there was a holiday atmosphere at Hogwarts. The few students who had not joined the strike discovered that there

was no one to teach them, as their professors were all on strike as well. The Headmistress found herself in the untenable position of trying to teach a handful of Slytherins from a variety of year levels a whole range of subjects, about which she knew very little. It became crystal clear that if something wasn't done soon, Hogwarts would have to close.

Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, swept into the Great Hall, just as the students were starting on their Wednesday evening meal. He was flanked on one side by a very important looking Percy Weasley, his Minister of Internal Security and on the other, by Dolores Umbridge, Headmistress of Hogwarts. Surrounding the three were some thirty grim-faced Ministry Aurors.

When they reached the front of the hall, the Headmistress took her customary seat at the teachers' table, wearing a very smug smile, while the Minister of Magic and Percy Weasley stood in front of it, facing the students. The Minister signalled his Aurors to secure the doors and to spread out around the sides of the hall, with wands drawn. It was clear that Fudge meant business.

Fudge cleared his throat and nodded to Percy.

"Students and staff of Hogwarts, you will now be silent. The Right Honourable Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, Order of Merlin, Extraordinary Class, will now address you," said Percy in a very loud voice.

Fudge glared around the room at the students. The students all looked away, but in whichever direction they turned their gaze, it inevitably fell upon an Auror, standing, wand drawn, in an intimidating posture. Fudge drew the students' petition from his robes, holding it up like a naughty child, held by its ear. "Who is responsible for this act of anarchy?" he demanded. There was silence.

"It is intolerable that my supreme authority should be challenged, and my precious time wasted, by a bunch of disobedient children! A strike is unprecedented in one thousand years of Hogwarts history. I will not

permit this insubordination, this – this mutiny – to go on for one moment longer. I intend to put down this illegal insurrection – by force.

“Under the terms of the ‘State of Emergency’, I exercise supreme power in the wizarding world. My authority is absolute, my word is Law – it may not be challenged by anyone. I do not intend to allow a bunch of wayward, mutinous children challenge my sovereign authority. I am going to make an example of the ringleaders who have fermented this rebellion. Then, the rest of you will know what awaits you if you do not immediately buckle down and learn absolute obedience to those in authority – without question!”

The Minister of Magic conferred with the Headmistress before pointing Harry and Hermione out to four Aurors, who immediately seized them. They were dragged to the front of the hall, and held in front of Fudge.

“Hem, hem. Your Excellency, Minister Fudge,” beseeched Umbridge, rising from her seat. “Please allow me to administer their punishment.”

“Certainly,” agreed Fudge. “Be sure to make a memorable example of these criminals, Headmistress. Make it a lesson, which the students of this school will never forget. Teach them the consequences of disobedience, insubordination, and subversion.”

Umbridge quickly made her way around to the front of the teachers’ table and stood next to Fudge. “Thank you, Minister. May I, hem, hem ... may I use the Cruciatus Curse on them Minister? They most certainly deserve it,” she pleaded, quivering with malicious anticipation.

“Hmm,” said Fudge, stroking his chin. “The Cruciatus Curse? That’s a little extreme.... But then again, this is an extreme provocation. It calls for an extreme response. Yes, I authorise you to use the Cruciatus Curse,” said Fudge, finally. “Then, they will be sent to Azkaban – for life.” A gasp rose up from the hall at the appalling ruthlessness of the Minister. “I hereby pronounce Harry Potter and Hermione Granger enemies of the wizarding world – let them suffer the consequences!”

Umbridge raised her wand, pointing it at Harry's chest. Her eyes glinting maliciously – a gleeful smile splitting her ugly face from ear to ear.

Harry stood bravely, bracing himself for the excruciating pain, which he knew all too well. He tried to reassure himself with the thought that he had experienced this curse at the hand of Voldemort, himself. This pathetic excuse for a witch would have nothing close to the Dark Lord's power.

"Cruc —" she began, but she never finished, because her wand suddenly flew out of her hand and began dancing about in circles above her head, just out of reach.

"Dolores, whatever is going on?" exploded Fudge. Umbridge looked foolish, as she jumped about, trying to pluck her wand from the air, but she couldn't quite reach it.

"For goodness sake!" said Fudge, in exasperation, as he came to her aid. He was certainly tall enough to reach her wand. But when he tried to grab it, the wand rose higher still. He turned furiously to Percy, who was scrutinising the hall. "Which student cast the spell on her wand, Weasley?"

"I, I've been watching them carefully Minister, but no one has used their wand. I have no idea what could have happened, sir."

"Really, Dolores, you had better get that wand of yours checked at Ollivanders. Ah well, I suppose it's the old story – if you want something done properly, you have to do it yourself. All right – I'll punish these two myself." He drew his wand and pointed it at Harry and was about to begin the Cruciatus Curse when his wand flew up in the air where it danced around just of his reach, exactly like the Headmistress'.

"What on earth is going on here?" bellowed Fudge in fury, glaring at Percy – as if it was his fault. But Percy didn't have a clue.

"Nothing on earth, Minister Fudge," came an eerie quavering voice, which seemed to fill the whole hall, rather than coming from any one

point in particular. As it spoke, the lights in the hall dimmed for a moment and it felt as if a cold mist had permeated the place.

Fudge looked about in confusion. “Who ... who said that? Who are you?”

“Allow me to introduce myself Minister Fudge. I am the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. I do wish I could say what a pleasure it is to make your acquaintance ... but sadly it is nothing of the kind. In fact, I cannot recall a more pathetic, petty, pretentious, inadequate person than you, as head of the wizarding world ... in these past one thousand years.

“Why, how dare you!” yelled Fudge. “I am the Minister of Magic!”

“I know what you are – I just finished telling you.” There was mirth in the disembodied voice.

“The Ministry of Magic has ultimate jurisdiction over all magical life forms, whether corporeal or incorporeal. That includes ghosts. As Minister of Magic, I have full authority over you – and I demand that you leave this hall at once,” commanded Fudge.

“And what if I don’t want to go ... what then?” The ghostly voice sounded highly amused at the thought of being expelled.

Fudge was furious at this public ridiculing. He turned to Percy, demanding to know what could be done to control unruly ghosts. Percy indicated that several of the Aurors present were trained in the use of the special spells used upon ghosts.

“I order those Aurors trained in dealing ghosts to eject this unruly ghost immediately. I have already wasted enough of my precious time,” said Fudge, trying to re-establish his dignity and authority. But none of them did a thing. “Hurry up now,” barked Fudge, “get this ghost out of here! I don’t have time for this nonsense.”

“Err ... umm, excuse me, sir,” said one of the Aurors nervously to the Minister. “But I don’t think that this is a normal ghost. It has no visible form and occupies no fixed location. Its voice seems to come from

everywhere at once. I have a great deal of experience in dealing with ghosts and the like, but this is quite beyond anything that I have ever encountered, sir. None of the standard ghost control spells can be used against it."

"Well does it have any power? Can it do anything?"

"A normal ghost can do very little Minister, but this does not appear to be a normal ghost so it's hard to know. It did manage to disarm you and the Headmistress, and it's still levitating your wands, sir, so it must have some power."

"All right," said Fudge, looking around the room. It was rather difficult to talk to a ghost when you didn't know where it was. "You say you are the ghost of Godric Gryffindor. In that case, I don't imagine you will want to see members of your own house hexed. Well that's exactly what will happen if you don't get out of here – and right this minute!"

"Aurors, surround the Gryffindor table and when I give the order, hex the students. Did you hear that, Ghost? Get out of here – now – or your Gryffindors will be badly hexed." Fudge was rather pleased at his cleverness. No surprises how I got to be Minister of Magic, he thought smugly to himself.

Suddenly, the Aurors discovered that they too, were empty-handed. Their wands had joined those of Umbridge and Fudge, spinning in aimless circles beneath the enchanted ceiling. However, the distance between them and their wands was soon reduced – not because their wands had come down – but rather, because they had gone up. The Aurors found themselves floating helplessly ten feet up in the air. They couldn't touch the students below them, nor reach their wands above them. They were totally useless, bobbing pathetically in the air.

"Well, Minister Fudge, I believe that establishes the fact that I do, indeed, have power. Now it's time for us to discuss what you are going to do to avoid suffering the consequences of that power."

“W - What do you mean?” stammered Fudge, beginning to realise that the tables were turned and that he had lost control of the situation.

The ghost ignored him. “You two Gryffindors there, please return to your table, the Minister has graciously decided to pardon you your sins. Not only that, but he is going to agree to all the demands in your petition, aren’t you, Fudge?”

“I most certainly am not! And don’t try bullying me by floating me around in the air. You don’t scare me at all,” said Fudge defiantly.

“Now listen to me, Fudge, and listen well.... The time for games is over. You may wonder why the spirit of one of the Hogwarts Founders has seen fit to return. I am here to prevent you from destroying this school and turning it into some kind of exclusive playground for Purebloods. I am also acting on behalf of Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff. Salazar Slytherin hasn’t been much interested in what happens here at Hogwarts since he parted company with us and left the school some thousand years ago. However, the three of us care very much about our school. We will always protect Hogwarts and its students in times of crisis.”

“But you’re all dead now! You are nothing but disembodied spirits!” shrieked Fudge. “It is well known that the spirits of the dead cannot act in the realm of the living. Your time is over, old ghost, now be gone with you! I am in charge in this realm and you have no right to interfere. It’s not ... not natural!”

“You in charge Fudge? What a joke. Who exactly do you think you’re fooling? Even we in the spirit world know that you are nothing but a puppet of Voldemort and his proxies.”

“How dare you! That’s outrageous!”

“Be quiet, you pathetic little quisling – I know all about you. You take your orders from Voldemort’s Death Eaters and do their bidding, while lining your grubby pockets with their gold. I know exactly how much you’ve taken in bribes and stashed away in your Gringotts vault, down to the last Knut.

“You are going to sign the Hogwarts students’ petition into law, and do exactly what I tell you to do.”

“Oh no, I’m not! I’m the Minister of Magic and you have no power over me! Why, you’re nothing more than an apparition. I don’t have to listen to a word you say.”

“Hmm, it seems that you are in need of an example of my power, Fudge. Now let’s see ... Yes, this feeble excuse for a Headmistress will do very nicely....

“Dolores Umbridge. I understand that last year you removed two Dementors from Azkaban and set them upon Harry Potter in Little Whinging, with orders to give him the ‘Dementor’s Kiss’ – to suck out his soul. Do you know what the punishment is for ordering the ‘Dementor’s Kiss’ on an innocent person?”

“This is nonsense,” roared Fudge. “Firstly, I hereby retroactively approve Dolores’ action, which makes it perfectly legal. Secondly, Harry Potter has been declared an enemy of the wizarding world, and as such, is stripped of all Wizarding rights and protections. Thirdly, I have revoked the whole criminal justice system. The only legal penalties are those that I, the Minister of Magic decide to impose. And fourthly, under the powers vested in me under the State of Emergency, I hereby absolve Dolores Umbridge of all wrongdoing and grant her an unconditional pardon.”

“Yes, we’ll come to your ‘State of Emergency’ in a moment. Please be patient, Fudge....

Now, where were we? Ah yes, Dolores Umbridge.... That’s right, your punishment for attempting to destroy the soul of an innocent person. A fitting punishment would, of course, be the ‘Dementor’s Kiss’ – the forfeit of your own soul. However, I am a most merciful ghost and would not wish to visit such a terrible retribution upon anyone ... not even you. You shall not be deprived of your soul ... only of your magic. Squibbus!”

Umbridge's wand slowly descended from above her, landing in her hand. She grasped it confidently, not believing the ghost.

"Well, go on ... try a spell, how about something simple like Lumos?"

"Lumos," she said with confidence, but no light came from her wand. She attempted a number of simple spells with growing desperation, but not a single one worked. Finally, she sank to the floor, her head bowed, her arms wrapped around her knees, sobbing hysterically. She made a pitiful and pathetic figure huddled there – a poignant illustration of the frightful consequences of the Squibbus Spell. There was stunned silence in the hall. Fudge stared at Umbridge; his face turned a deathly shade of white, his jaw hanging, as the implications sank in.

"Well, that's the end of her career as Headmistress of Hogwarts. I do believe that the position requires a proficiency in magic – something which she clearly lacks.

"Now, Fudge, I think you will do exactly as I tell you. It will not be lost upon you that the job description for 'Minister of Magic' includes amongst other attributes, the ability to perform magic. A Squib, for example ... would not be eligible to hold such a position," said the ghost, in a threatening tone.

"Now, write at the bottom of the students' petition that you agree to all of their demands in full, and sign it."

With shaking hands, Fudge picked up the petition, from where he had dropped it on the floor, and taking a quill from his pocket, did exactly as instructed. Loud applause and cheers broke out from all around the hall. Fudge just stood there, stony faced. He had just eaten humble pie and he didn't like the taste at all.

"How very good to see that you wish to be cooperative, Minister. You may be allowed to retain your office for a while longer. However, you shall not retain one Knut of your ill-gotten graft. In fact, it has already been removed from your vault – every Galleon, Sickle and Knut."

“What right have you to steal from me?” demanded Fudge, his face purple with outrage.

“None of your own gold has been taken, Fudge, only the bribes that you have garnered from Lucius Malfoy and his cronies, for doing their bidding. But don’t worry – they won’t be getting their gold back. I decided that a little redistribution of wealth was in order. So I shared it out amongst the vaults of various worthy charities and the poor. You should really be quite pleased with your act of selfless generosity, Fudge.

“Now, in order to remain ‘qualified’ to continue in the office of Minister of Magic, you will sign this Magical Contract.”

A parchment appeared just in front of the Minister and began to announce its terms.

I, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic do hereby swear that I shall expedite the following measures as quickly as possible and to the very best of my abilities:

1. The ‘State of Emergency’ is lifted with immediate effect.
2. All declarations issued under the ‘State of Emergency’ are hereby declared null and void.
3. The Wizengamot shall be fully restored to its former position and authority.
4. All judicial bodies and forums shall be restored with all their previous powers.
5. The cases of all those pardoned under the ‘State of Emergency’ shall be reviewed by a judicial committee with the power to indict anyone with a case to answer.
6. All former Ministry committees shall be re-established and vested with all their traditional powers.

7. The censorship laws shall be repealed, and the media shall be free to publish whatever they wish, without regard to any authority.

8. The Auror division shall be rebuilt and all former Aurors who were dismissed shall be invited to return to their previous positions.

In addition to all of the above measures, I hereby swear that I shall never take another bribe from anyone, and that I shall never again use my position as Minister of Magic to support, benefit, or assist Lord Voldemort or his minions.

I agree that under the magical terms of this contract, any breach will result in my immediate transformation into a Squib.”

“And if I don’t agree to sign it?” asked Fudge cautiously.

“Then you will be ‘Squibbed’ this instant.”

Fudge sighed in defeat. The game was up; his glory days of absolute power were over. He signed the petition.

Wild applause and cheering rang through the hall. The students and professors were aware that they had witnessed an important moment of history, a moment that had completely re-ordered the power structure on the Magical world and freed it from a terrible tyranny.

As the noise died down, the Aurors began descending to the floor and their wands were returned to them. As Fudge pocketed his wand, he realised how precious it was to him, and determined to try very hard to ensure that he would be able to continue using it.

Fudge ordered a couple of Aurors to assist the former Headmistress to her feet and together with Percy, still his deputy, but no longer Minister of Internal Security, as that position had been created under the erstwhile ‘State of Emergency’, he departed the hall with his Aurors as quickly as possible. The Ghost of Godric Gryffindor also appeared to have departed.

Professor McGonagall rose to her feet and when silence was finally restored she told the students to eat up and enjoy their meal. “Tonight

you may celebrate,” she told them. “You have helped to win a great victory for Hogwarts. But don’t stay up too late – tomorrow it’s classes as usual.”

But they were far too excited to focus on eating for quite some time. Hermione looked at Harry and noticed the remarkable change in him. He was talking excitedly to her and Ron about how the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor had again trumped their enemies. Harry was almost unrecognisable from the depressed, hopeless, and withdrawn wizard he had been at the start of the term. His confidence was back, he was full of fight and determination. Harry knew that he was no longer alone. Finally he felt that he had a chance.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 10 - A Witch's Prerogative

Within a matter of days, Professor Dumbledore, Tonks, and Hagrid had returned, and Hogwarts felt like Hogwarts once more. Argus Filch and Mrs. Norris were also back, prowling the corridors at night. Ron muttered something about every silver lining having a dark cloud. But as Harry pointed out, it wasn't really Hogwarts without them and that the students would have missed the sport of evading them in their after-hours excursions.

Professor Dumbledore invited Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Rick to his study the afternoon following his return. He had laid on a lavish tea, by way of thanks for their achievements during his absence.

Harry had already met with the Headmaster earlier in the day, to recount the details of his encounter with Lucius Malfoy and his subsequent Squibbing by the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor.

"I am very proud of the way you led the students to stand up to Fudge and his tyranny. I believe that in the years to come, this will be remembered as one of the great moments in Hogwart's history."

"Just think, Hermione," said Ron with a sly grin, "your name might end up in your favourite book, 'Hogwarts, a History'."

Hermione blushed, but the Headmaster agreed. "I would be most surprised if Miss Granger's name – and indeed all of your names, do not appear in some future edition of that venerable book. Now, I thought about awarding points to Gryffindor, in recognition of your great achievement. However, that would detract from the fact that students from all four houses – the whole school, almost – rose up so bravely behind you."

"That's right," said Harry. "We succeeded because almost all of the students – and the Professors – were willing to stand up and be counted. It wouldn't be fair to single out anyone for a special reward, or to award house points only to Gryffindor."

“Well said, Harry. Well said. The whole school deserves a reward – and they shall have it. On the final day of term there will be a Yule Party for the younger students and a Yule Ball for the older ones.”

Harry and Ron weren’t quite sure if this was any kind of a reward at all. Balls could be very problematic, as they had discovered on previous occasions. They were going to have to invite girls – and ask them to dance. The thought terrified them both. Dealing with Umbridge was one thing – but girls were quite another.

While they were lost in fear and loathing of this new challenge that lay ahead, Hermione spoke up. “Professor Dumbledore, despite all of our efforts and the support of the other students and professors, we would have ultimately failed, had it not been for the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor.”

“Yes, Miss Granger, you are quite correct. It was fortuitous indeed that the spirits of the Hogwarts Founders had determined to intervene. Although it is not, perhaps, entirely surprising. After all, this school was their life’s work. One would hardly expect them to stand by and allow it to all be undone by Lucius Malfoy and Cornelius Fudge.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Hermione. “But have you ever heard of a ghost being able to exert so much power in the realm of the living? It’s unprecedented. Turning wizards and witches into Squibs is unheard of.”

“Yes, indeed, it is most unusual, Miss Granger, and I cannot recall reading of such ghostly powers. However, remember, for every genre of magic, ever manifested, there must always be a first occasion. It seems we are witnessing something new – and I for one am very thankful to the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor.”

As they were leaving his study, the Headmaster caught Rick’s eye in a way that invited him to read his mind. The Headmaster requested that he visit him, alone, later that evening.

“Allow me to congratulate you,” said the Headmaster when Rick Apparated to his study after dinner that evening. “Your Ghost of Godric Gryffindor is a masterpiece – simply brilliant. Wherever did you get the idea?”

“Well, it was all rather sudden; it sort of happened on the spur of the moment, sir. When Umbridge summoned Harry to meet with her that evening, I read her mind and discovered that it was a trap – and that Lucius Malfoy was going to be there. So I quickly left the Great Hall and Apparated invisibly to the room. After Lucius Malfoy stunned Harry, I had to do something to stop him taking Harry to Voldemort, but I didn’t want to reveal myself. So I decided to pretend to be an invisible ghost.”

“Why the ghost of Godric Gryffindor?” asked the Headmaster, intrigued.

“I don’t know, sir. It just came to me out of the blue. I have his wand, and I probably have as many gifts from him, as I have from any other witch or wizard. It also gave my actions a purpose, because if Gryffindor’s ghost had the power, I think he would have done all the things that I’ve done in his name. It just ... seemed to make sense.”

“Yes, I understand. Gryffindor was a perfect choice. But where on earth did you get the Squibbus Curse from? I’ve never heard of it, nor read about it. Dark wizards have searched hard for just such a curse; but as far as I know, none ever succeeded in finding one. Your magic comes from the great witches and wizards of the Light – to the best of my knowledge none of them ever used such a spell.”

Rick told the Headmaster what Hermione had told him about Germaine Pankhurst’s book about Circe. “Pankhurst claimed that that Circe once cast a spell on an evil sorcerer, destroying his power. Circe later turned to the Light, and she was great witch, so I figured that I might have received gifts from her – including that spell. It’s strange, but generally I’m not aware of all the spells and powers that I’ve been gifted with. I only seem to become aware of them when I need them. It’s almost as if the spirit of the one from whom the power comes, actually links with me when I need to use it.”

“I’ve been spending quite a bit of time experimenting with my powers, professor. However, I have discovered a serious limitation. I don’t think that it’s possible for me to kill another person – not even Voldemort. It’s hard to explain. It ... it’s something very deep within me which seems to be connected to all of life. It makes me feel connected to everyone and everything, even villains, like Lucius Malfoy. Killing another person, even a deadly enemy, would be somehow, like killing a part of my self,” said Rick, struggling to explain this perplexing feeling.

“So you searched for a non-lethal way of neutralizing your enemies?” asked Dumbledore.

“Yes,” replied Rick, “exactly. I didn’t know for sure if the Squibbus Curse would work, until I tried it on Lucius Malfoy. My backup plan was to Apparate him to some remote part of Africa, without his wand, but that would only have been a temporary solution.”

“It’s brilliant,” said Dumbledore, impressed. “Now you have the ultimate weapon to use against the forces of the Dark and the perfect vehicle in the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor to wield it – or simply threaten to use it, as you did so effectively with Fudge. You handled him very well. He’s never likely to be much help to us, but at least he will no longer be aiding and abetting the Death Eaters. By the way, please be sure not to Squib Percy Weasley.”

“It’s OK, Professor, I checked him out the first time he came to Hogwarts. I knew he was working for you.”

“I do hope that you haven’t told anyone. Only his parents are aware that he is my top informant at the Ministry – not even his brothers and sister know.”

“I guessed as much, sir. I haven’t told a soul. I had thought about Squibbing Fudge, so that Percy, as his deputy, could take over, but I didn’t know if you would want me to.”

“That would not be a good idea at the moment, Rick. While Voldemort and his Death Eaters are so strong, it is not possible for the Ministry to recover its rightful role. If Percy took over and attempted to rebuild

it, he would certainly be killed. If the Ministry began to pose a threat to Voldemort, it would be destroyed. It's too visible, and too vulnerable a target. No, I'd rather leave Fudge in charge for now. He's such an incompetent fool that Voldemort will probably leave the Ministry alone and it won't hinder us either.

"Fudge is adept at 'rolling with the punches'. He'll maintain a neutral position now. But behind the scenes, Percy will be able to pull some strings and also keep me informed of any important news. With the 'State of Emergency' and the rest of Fudge's authoritarian measures lifted, the Ministry may begin to provide at least some measure of order in the wizarding world once more."

Dumbledore proceeded to question Rick at length on the development and use of his powers and his efforts at concealing them. Rick told him of Hermione's abduction by Pansy Parkinson and her subsequent rescue from Draco Malfoy's clutches.

"It was fortuitous indeed, that Miss Granger's pleas alerted you to her plight. If I am not mistaken, some kind of special link has developed between the two of you. Most curious, most curious – it may be worthwhile investigating it further. I couldn't help but notice you exhibiting a certain affection towards Miss Granger, when you were all in my office earlier today," he added, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

Rick blushed. "Err, are my powers of Occlumency that bad?" he stuttered, desperately hoping that all his thoughts and feelings about Hermione were not an open book to the Headmaster.

"Why no, Rick, you are an outstanding Occlumens. Your mind is totally impenetrable. However, you are not very gifted in hiding your emotions from your face and body language. Professor Snape is adept in these matters – I wonder if I could ask him to give you a little coaching, perhaps, without arousing his suspicions."

"Err, no thanks, sir," Rick blurted out quickly, keen to scotch that idea. "I'm sure I can find a good book to read on the subject."

“As you wish,” said Dumbledore, with amusement. “I think that you are likely to have great difficulties in concealing your secrets from Miss Granger. She has a brilliant and penetrating mind and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. You must represent quite a mystery to her – and she is not the witch to leave any mystery unsolved.”

Yeah, tell me about it, thought Rick.

The following evening in the Great Hall, Professor Dumbledore announced his intention to treat the students to a Yule Party and Ball, as a token of his gratitude for their outstanding bravery.

The hall was immediately abuzz with whispers and giggles and it took a few moments for the Headmaster to restore quiet, in order to continue.

“On the final day of term, there will be a Yule Party in the afternoon for students in years one, two, and three. In the evening, Hogwarts will once again host a Yule Ball for fourth year students and up.

“It would be wrong to single out individuals for special praise as the great success of your actions was due to the collective solidarity shown by almost every one of you, and I am very proud of you all. However, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that both the petition and the strike were the brainchild of Miss Hermione Granger. In recognition, I have decided that the Yule Ball will be a little different from previous Hogwarts balls. It will be a Witches’ Prerogative.”

Again whispers and chatter filled the hall. Everyone was asking what on earth a Witches’ Prerogative could be.

“Ah, I seem to have caused some confusion,” said the Headmaster smiling. “Well usually it’s the prerogative of the wizards to invite the witches to a ball. However, when it’s a Witches’ Prerogative, the tables are turned. It’s the Witches’ Prerogative to invite the wizards.”

The hall was once more filled with excited chatter and giggles.

“And,” added the Headmaster, using a powerful Sonorus Charm, to make himself heard above the din, “it is also the Witches’ Prerogative to ask the wizards to dance, rather than the other way around.”

At this point, the noise became deafening. The Headmaster sat down, with a smile on his face. If he had intended saying anything further, he had obviously given up all hope of being heard.

“Hey,” said Harry, “this Witches’ Prerogative thing could work out quite well for us. For once we don’t have to worry about asking someone to the ball. I really hate that.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Ron. “But, err ... what if no one invites us?” he asked apprehensively.

“Well, then we won’t have to go to the ball at all!” said Harry. “I mean you don’t really want to go to the ball do you? I know I don’t.”

Ron didn’t seem so sure, but he didn’t want to look like he was keen to go – especially since he might not be invited. “Well, there’d be lots of really good food, remember. We could just eat, and look at the girls, all dressed up in their finest robes.”

“Err, Ron,” said Harry. “Didn’t you hear what Dumbledore just said about it being the Witches’ Prerogative to ask wizards to dance? We might have to dance all night. No, I definitely don’t want to go!”

“Right,” said Ron, suddenly thinking how embarrassing it would be if no one asked him to dance. Harry’s right, he thought. It would be better not to go at all.

It was probably the noisiest evening meal that anyone could remember at Hogwarts. All the noise was coming from the girls, as they excitedly discussed who they wanted to invite. Most of the boys were quiet. Many of them, like Ron, felt apprehensive, wondering if anyone would invite them at all. Hermione thought the whole thing was a load of nonsense. She was not particularly pleased to have her name associated with a ball. She pulled a book from her bag, and disappeared behind it.

The most obvious difference in having the witches doing the inviting was that they were all very keen to get the wizard they wanted. Having the power to decide who they would ask was a rare opportunity, and they weren't going to waste it by waiting to the last minute to make their move, like the wizards usually did. In fact, as the meal came to an end, there was an air of great expectation.... The Great Hogwarts Wizard Hunt had begun.

"I wouldn't turn around right now if I was you," Harry advised Rick. "There are about twenty witches hovering about behind you. I think they're waiting for you to get up from the table so they can invite you to the ball."

"Oh no," sighed Rick, wishing he could just Apparate away. Hermione, who was also sitting opposite him, looked up and saw all the witches and when she did, she realised that she really wanted to invite Rick. But she wasn't sure exactly how to go about it. This really wasn't in her 'skill set'. This Witches' Prerogative was a real bother.

Rick, observing her thoughts, was trying to think of a way to prompt her. He wanted to go with Hermione – and no one else.

"Umm Hermione," said Rick nervously. "Could you do me a ... a really huge favour?"

"And what would that be?" asked Hermione, suspiciously.

"Well as soon as I get up, a whole bunch of witches are going to pounce on me and ask me to go to the ball with them."

"And?" asked Hermione, raising her eyebrows. "Exactly what am I supposed to do to rescue you from your hordes of besotted admirers?"

"Well, I'd have to refuse them, and that would cause a lot of hurt feelings," explained Rick, with a sigh.

"And why exactly would you have to refuse them?" asked Hermione.

“Because, I’d want to keep myself free – in the desperate hope that the witch who I really want to go with, would invite me – that’s why,” said Rick staring meaningfully into Hermione’s eyes.

Hermione was really in a quandary now. She really did want to invite Rick and he was making it all too obvious that he wanted her to invite him. But it was her prerogative – not his to do the inviting!

“But this is supposed to be a Witches’ Prerogative,” protested Hermione, “and you’re trying to usurp my prerogative by suggesting that I should invite you.”

“No, no, not at all,” said Rick. “I’m ... I’m just trying to point out that I’m currently available, but I won’t be for much longer ... it’s entirely your prerogative. But if you don’t hurry up, I’m likely to be usurped by Lavender Brown,” he added nervously, noticing that Lavender had decided to jump the growing queue of witches behind him and was attempting to squeeze herself down on the bench beside him, to pop the question.

Hermione was definitely not going to let Lavender get away with that. “OK, so ... err, um, d’youwannacometotheball with me?” mumbled Hermione, feeling very self-conscious.

“Why yes,” replied Rick, smiling with relief. “I thought you’d never ask!”

Once word got out that Hermione Granger had snared the most eligible wizard, the bunch of witches behind him quickly broke up ... it was time for plan B ... or C. The hunt was on in earnest now. Witches were roaming the hall purposefully, determined to find a partner. Many of the wizards were feeling a little intimidated – and anxious.

“Err, Harry,” said Rick, “I wouldn’t turn around right now if I was you.”

But Ron turned around and then turned back even faster. “Hey Harry, it looks like it’s your turn now. Somehow, I don’t think you’re going to get your wish about missing this ball.”

Ron and Rick weren't the only ones who had noticed the bunch of witches lying in wait for Harry. Ginny Weasley had squeezed herself down on the bench next to Rick and without further ado, spoke to Harry from across the table.

She was blushing so furiously that it was hard to say whether her hair or her face was the redder, but she was determined. "Harry, will you come to the Yule Ball with me?"

"Err, sure," said Harry. He couldn't refuse her. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, and if he was being honest with himself, if he did have to go to this stupid ball, he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather go with.

Ginny quickly got up to go. As she rose she met a wall of glares from the witches opposite, but they didn't hang about for long. They still had a mission to complete, they needed to find a partner.

By the time they left the hall that evening, most of the 'eligible' wizards (those from fourth year and up) had been snapped up – the competition had been fierce. Ron was stunned by just how assertive the witches were in comparison to his own timidity – talk about taking no hostages! He was also pleasantly surprised that a number of witches had actually invited him. He was particularly pleased that the first one had been Padma Patil.

Like her sister Parvati, she was a dark-haired, dark-skinned beauty. But Padma seemed less frivolous than Parvati. She had intelligence as well as looks and had been one of the leading lights in organising the Ravenclaws with the petition and the strike. Ron was surprised that she seemed to have forgiven him for being such a prat when he'd taken her to the Yule Ball in their fourth year, and then proceeded to ignore her the whole night. He sure wasn't going to make that mistake again.

One Saturday afternoon, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Rick were sitting together in the Gryffindor common room. Hermione was deeply absorbed in a parchment she was writing, with books piled up all around.

“Hey, it’s the weekend Hermione, time to relax,” said Ron. “Anyway, you said last night that you’d just finished your last assignment for the term, so what are you working on now?”

With difficulty, Hermione disengaged herself from her deep train of thought. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? I’m doing a special research paper under Professor McGonagall this year.”

“Whatever for?” asked Ron. “You’re already taking more classes than everyone else; do you really think you need the extra marks?”

“Don’t be silly, Ron. I’m not doing it for marks, although I may earn Gryffindor some house-points. I’m doing it because it’s something that really interests me.”

“What’s the topic?” asked Rick.

“The Special Powers of Witches,” answered Hermione.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry, confused. “I thought witches and wizards could all perform exactly the same kinds of magic. I mean we all learn the same stuff here at Hogwarts, don’t we?”

“Well that’s what most wizards would like to believe,” said Hermione with a superior smirk. “And generally it’s true. However, there seem to be some types of obscure magic which only witches have been known to perform.”

Ron was sceptical. “Well I’ve never heard that before and I grew up in the wizarding world. I mean if it’s true, why isn’t it a well-known fact? Why isn’t it mentioned in the history books? Why isn’t it taught here at Hogwarts? Why aren’t there special subjects just for witches?”

“Because all the things you just mentioned are controlled by wizards – that’s why,” said Hermione, with growing passion. “How many Ministers of Magic – or even departmental heads – have been witches? How many Hogwarts Headmistresses have there been?”

“Well, there was Umbridge,” said Ron with a smirk.

“Don’t mention that stupid witch,” said Hermione, dismissively. “This is a serious subject. The wizarding world has always been controlled by wizards. I mean there were times, like those of the Founders, when witches rose to prominence and had their rightful influence.

“But wizards have almost always been in control of the political establishment, the educational institutions, the publishing houses, and the media. Even in so-called enlightened times like these, when witches are not being overtly oppressed, wizards still have the levers of power and communication firmly in their hands, and it allows them to largely define the ‘reality’ which everyone in the wizarding world believes in.

“The wizarding world is far behind the Muggle world in according females an equal place in society – and even the Muggle world has a long way to go – just don’t get me started on that! The bottom line is that wizards have been in control and they have never been interested in the special powers of witches, so it has always been overlooked and largely invisible.”

“Err, want a game of wizard chess Harry?” asked Ron, desperate to escape from Hermione’s impassioned lecture. Harry readily agreed, and they were soon absorbed in their game.

“So you’re hoping, through doing this special research paper, and publishing it, to make these special powers of witches more visible?” asked Rick, impressed once again with Hermione’s gumption.

“Yes, that’s right. Professor McGonagall is very interested and supportive. If I can define and document a large enough body of witch magic, she says that we may be able to run special seminars, here at Hogwarts, just for witches. Eventually there may even be an elective course in the subject at senior levels.”

“I’m impressed,” said Rick. “So what kinds of witch magic have you identified so far?”

“Well, there are the obvious ones that derive from the anatomical differences between witches and wizards, of course. There is the

whole area of 'witch midwifery'. Then there is magical birth control," said Hermione, blushing slightly and averting her gaze from Rick.

"Much of this magic goes back centuries," she continued, trying to assume a more academic tone. "The spells have been handed down from mother to daughter, but the magic has never been officially recognised or recorded. However, there is another area which is far more interesting. Again, it relates to differences between males and females, but it has more to do with the differences in emotional make-up, than, err ... physical differences."

"That sounds interesting," said Rick.

"The origin is probably the nurturing instinct that witches have for their babies. Did you know that witches seem to know, to some extent, how their baby is feeling?" Many witches can feel their baby's pain if it is sick, for example. It's very useful before the baby is able to talk and tell its mother what it's feeling."

"So is this magic restricted to witches with babies?" asked Rick, becoming increasingly interested.

"No, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that even witches who have never had children can manifest this kind of magic. It's called Empathetic Magic, and it requires neither a wand nor a spell. Like other forms of magic, there is a variance between individuals in their ability to perform it, but the key factor seems to be affection."

"You mean the more a witch likes someone, the stronger, it will be?" asked Rick.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "There is a story about Helga Hufflepuff, in her earlier years at Hogwarts. She had a ..., err, lover. It wasn't Gryffindor or Slytherin. In fact his name is unknown. He was a wizard who lived in a village on the other side of the Forbidden Forest, and he would sometimes cross it to, err ... visit Helga. There were probably as many dangerous creatures living in the Forbidden Forest at that time as there are now. The story goes that on several occasions, this wizard was badly injured by some dangerous creature he'd encountered. But because of her great gift for Empathetic Magic,

Helga would immediately know that he was in danger – and where he was, and would go to rescue him.”

“Just like I knew when you were in danger down in the dungeon,” mused Rick, certain that he had discovered what his link with Hermione was, and from whom the gift had come. He reflected on how fortunate it was that even though he was a wizard, he had been blessed with witch magic.

“Well, I have no idea how you heard me calling you and how you found me that night, but it obviously wasn’t Empathetic Magic – unless of course, you’ve got anatomical secrets that you’re hiding as well,” said Hermione, with a smirk.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 11 - Séances and Interrogations

Professor Trelawney had become obsessed with the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor ever since his appearance in the Great Hall. Unfortunately, she had missed the spectacle since she rarely descended from her lofty spiritual abode to join the school for mundane meals. She was, however, utterly thrilled that this venerable visitor from the world beyond had returned to Hogwarts, and she was determined to make contact with him. As Hogwart's self-proclaimed mystical mistress, she saw it as both her right and her duty.

However, the ghost did not appear to share her enthusiasm. For over a week, all of her Divination classes had been devoted to this, her sacred mission, of reaching out to the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor – But with no success at all.

Finally, she decided that the most conducive environment for forging contact with the ghost would be his own former abode, Gryffindor Tower. Lavender and Parvati enthusiastically agreed to help her organise a séance, which was to take place one evening in the Gryffindor common room. All the Gryffindor students were requested to attend this unusual event. Trelawney hoped that the ghost might come to his own students.

The tables were arranged into a large circle with the students seated around the outside. The lights were dimmed and incense was lit. Lavender and Parvati had made artful mystical arrangements upon the tables. They were covered with an assortment of crystal balls, tarot cards and various other divination and psychic paraphernalia – it was all rather impressive. Hopefully the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor would be impressed enough to put in an appearance.

Hermione Granger, however, was not impressed. She was annoyed – very annoyed. She'd been working hard on her research paper when her table had been all but pulled out from under her, to join the mystical circle. She was outraged. Everyone knew that Trelawney was nothing but a fraud, and that Divination was nonsense, suitable only for light entertainment. Well maybe not everyone knew, though Hermione. Lavender and Parvati – who had stolen her table from

under her – obviously didn't know. But Hermione most definitely did know – and she was furious at having her serious research work interrupted by this mindless nonsense.

As she gathered her books together, intending to go to the library, Ron called out, "Hey, Hermione, where are you going? You'll miss all the fun." He didn't have any more faith in Trelawney than Hermione, but he thought it might be entertaining.

"I'm going to the library, so that I can get some work done," she replied huffily. "I don't have time for Trelawney's theatrics."

"You never know Hermione. She might just manage to summon the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor," said Harry, who seemed more willing than his friends to give the Divination teacher a chance. "Sometimes she gets lucky. I mean it was Trelawney who gave the Prophecy, and she's given a couple of accurate predictions since then."

"That makes her success rate about one genuine achievement every five years," replied Hermione, archly. "I really don't have the patience to wait for the next one. Err, where's Rick?" she asked, looking for him among the students seated around the circle of tables.

Hermione was, in fact, very interested in the enigmatic Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. He was number two on her list of great mysteries that she was determined to solve. But she didn't expect Trelawney, and her silly séance, to yield any useful information.

Rick was mystery number one, and Hermione had a suspicion that there was some kind of link between him and mystery number two. For one thing, no one could remember seeing Rick around on the two occasions that the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor had appeared. Perhaps she should stay in the common room. She might find some clues to one or both of these annoying mysteries, which were starting to drive her crazy.

"He's over there," said Harry, pointing to a table in the corner of the room that had not been requisitioned for the circle. He was reading a book and did not appear to be taking much interest in the preparations for the séance. Hermione was about to go over to join

him, but then changed her mind. Instead she joined the silly séance circle, choosing a spot where she could surreptitiously observe Rick.

“Hey, Hermione,” called Ron. “So you decided not to go to the library after all? Good move – you can observe The Special Powers of Witches firsthand – with Trelawney,” he added snidely. Hermione glared at Ron and was about to make a very unflattering remark about the Divination professor – and her art, when the portrait hole swung open.

Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance, looking even more ethereal and mysterious than usual. She was evidently anticipating great happenings this evening. Parvati and Lavender led her to the special place that they had prepared for her in the circle.

“Everyone, please hold hands,” she said. “We are gathered here this evening to summon the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor.” She closed her eyes and nodded her head slowly from side to side in a dream-like way. “Focus your mind on Godric Gryffindor,” she instructed in a low, ethereal voice. “Open your inner eye and visualise him standing before us, in the centre of our sacred circle. Call him silently from deep within you. He will surely come.”

But he didn’t come.

After some minutes Professor Trelawney called out in an eerie voice, “Godric Gryffindor! Oh brave and noble Founder of Hogwarts, we beseech thee to grace us with thine presence – please make some sign to show that you hear me.”

Nothing happened – no sign, nothing. The students were becoming restless. Murmurs of discontent could be heard from around the circle.

Professor Trelawney continued her attempts at enticing Godric Gryffindor to make an appearance; each time adding more and wilder superlatives to her litany. However he staunchly resisted all entreaties.

Finally she announced that it appeared that the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor was otherwise engaged that evening. However, since they

were all gathered together in a mystic séance circle, she would attempt to contact others from the spirit world.

She tried summoning Helga Hufflepuff and then Rowena Ravenclaw, but without success. There was general opposition when she proposed summoning Salazar Slytherin. The Gryffindors were not having him – or even his ghostly apparition – in their common room.

So she tried Merlin, Morgana, Mopsus, and Merwyn the Malicious, all without success. Ron suggested she try the great wizard chess master, Montague Knightly, as there was a particular opening gambit that he was keen to ask him about. But he didn't show either.

After attempting, without success, to summon the ghost of every great witch and wizard that she and the students could think of, Professor Trelawney made a remarkable discovery.

First she consulted her crystal ball. Then she unfurled and examined her personal star chart, which she carried with her everywhere. Then she did a quick Tarot reading. "I am very sorry to have to tell you," she announced to the students. "But all the signs concur. This particular evening is not at all auspicious for contacting the spirit world. I do apologise. I should have checked before arranging the séance for this evening. Perhaps we can try again at a more auspicious time."

She thanked everyone for their participation and began packing away her crystal balls and talismans and other baubles and bangles and beads. Lavender and Parvati were escorting her to the portrait hole when suddenly the lights dimmed and a cold presence made itself felt throughout the common room. Nothing could be seen, but a ghostly voice reverberated throughout the room.

"Sibyll Trelawney, I come with a message for you, from the spirit world."

"Are you the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor? Have you finally heard our summonses and come?" asked Professor Trelawney, in ecstasy. She seemed to have totally missed the irony of the fact that the ghost had not appeared until after she had ceased summoning it.

“Yes, I am the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor, and I have come on account of your summonses.”

“In fact, I have a message for you from some of the other inhabitants of the spirit realm – Rowena Ravenclaw, Helga Hufflepuff, Merlin, Morgana and all the others that you have been so enthusiastically summoning this evening.”

“How wonderful, so you did hear me! Our séance was a success after all! How marvellous! This is the most exciting moment of my life – to have been in contact with the spirits of so many great and illustrious witches and wizards!” The Divination professor was in raptures.

“But you must have noticed that none of us responded to you?”

“Umm ... yes. Why was that?” asked Trelawney, sounding a little perplexed.

“Well, you see ... we don’t give interviews.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We don’t give interviews. You do understand my meaning, don’t you?” asked the ghost, emphasising each word very clearly.

“Err ... No,” replied Trelawney, now completely confused.

“Perhaps I need to put it a little more bluntly,” said the ghost, sounding annoyed. “The message I have for you from the inhabitants of the spirit world, is that we do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Your little séance tonight; and your other feeble attempts to contact me over the past few days – and indeed your attempts at contacting various members of the spirit world, from time to time, as the ‘spirit takes you’, disturb our peace. We have a message for you, and the message is, ‘Do not disturb’.

“We do not want you to contact us – at all! Rest assured, that if there is anything, of great import, that we wish you to know, we will contact

you. I believe there is a colloquial expression in your world which sums it up rather nicely, 'Don't call us, we'll call you!'"

The Ghost of Godric Gryffindor said no more, and appeared to have departed. A very embarrassed Professor Trelawney followed suit and dived through the portrait hole.

Laughter and giggling and much joking at Professor Trelawney's expense ensued.

But there was one witch who was not laughing, giggling, or joking. Hermione had been keeping an eye on Rick while the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor was present in the common room. Rick had been slumped back in his chair, as if he were asleep or perhaps unconscious. She had kept checking on him, and he was like that the whole time the ghost was present.

No one else would have noticed, as he was in the corner and all attention had been focused on Professor Trelawney, by the portrait hole, at the other end of the common room. As soon as the ghost was gone, Rick was sitting upright and very much awake. He was now laughing as loudly as everyone else. But when his gaze reached Hermione and he saw the way that she was scrutinising him, he stopped laughing and quickly looked away.

Hermione walked over and sat down next to him. She knew she was on to something, but she wasn't quite sure what. This time she wasn't going to let him wriggle off the hook.

"Rick," she said, looking at him accusingly, "I know you had something to do with the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor's appearance. I was watching you the whole time he was in the room, and you were slumped unconsciously in your chair. You might as well tell me the truth you know, because I'm determined to find out."

Rick took out his wand and cast an Imperturbable Charm around them, so they couldn't be overheard. He also cast his Wizard Repelling Charm. He knew he was going to have to deal with Hermione's curiosity and he didn't want to arouse anyone else's.

Hermione, meanwhile, had removed one of the colour-coded folders from her bulging book-bag. She opened it up and started adding notes to the bottom of one of the many parchments it contained.

"I'm a medium," said Rick, attempting to deflect Hermione. "I was channelling, the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. I have psychic powers."

Hermione looked unconvinced. She was not a great believer in such things, but she added a further note to her parchment. "This is my Rick Godfry dossier," she said matter-of-factly. "I've recorded the details of every strange event that has occurred around you since the start of term."

"I guess I should feel flattered," said Rick – but he didn't. He felt more like a fox, cornered by a pack of ravenous bloodhounds.

"Let's start with your name, shall we?" said Hermione turning to the beginning of her thick dossier.

"Err, what about my name?" asked Rick, perplexed.

"It's an anagram of Godric – as in Godric Gryffindor."

"What?" said Rick, genuinely puzzled.

"Rick God-fry. Put the God in front of the Rick and you get Godric(k). Didn't you realise that?"

"Umm, no, it never occurred to me. How strange. I wonder if it was intentional?" Rick mused.

"Intentional? What exactly do you mean by intentional?" asked Hermione, raising her eyebrows. Rick didn't answer. Hermione noted his comment in her dossier. Then she picked up Rick's wand from the table and started examining it carefully.

"It's just a wand," said Rick nervously. He wished he'd put it away in his robes, he was usually very careful to keep it concealed. He really didn't want Hermione examining it, but if he grabbed it from her, it would only increase her interest. "I know it looks a bit different, but

that's because it's, err, it's made from, err, the wood of an unusual tree, err ... the giant Kauri."

But Hermione wasn't listening. She had transformed her own wand into a magnifying glass and was examining Rick's wand painstakingly.

"I knew it – there it is," she said triumphantly, pointing to a small symbol at the top of the wand, "It's the rune of the Moor Barrow. We learned about it in Ancient Runes. This rune symbolises the power and strength of Godric Gryffindor – it was etched into his wand. I thought I recognised this wand from a painting of Gryffindor – it's very distinctive."

Looking Rick straight in the eye, she said, "This is Godric Gryffindor's wand, isn't it Rick?"

"Err, yes," said Rick, with a sigh. There was no point denying it.

"What on earth are you doing with Godric Gryffindor's wand?"

"Professor Dumbledore gave it to me," said Rick, trying to make it sound like it was no big deal.

"I knew it was displayed in the Founders cabinet in the Headmaster's office, it's mentioned in 'Hogwarts, a History'. But why would he give it to you?"

"Err ... because the Ghost Godric Gryffindor asked him to – would you believe?" said Rick smiling, and trying to lighten things up a little.

"No," said Hermione, "I would not believe. There is absolutely no need to introduce psychic phenomena. Everything can be explained from well established and accepted magical principles. It's unbelievable that Professor Dumbledore would give you this wand – it's an antiquity – but I don't imagine that you stole it, so he must have given it to you – but why?" Hermione stopped talking for a few moments while she jotted down some notes about the wand.

"Umm ... it's because I'm a psychic," said Rick, trying to sound convincing. "The Ghost Godric Gryffindor came to me in a vision and

said that he wanted me to have his wand, so that I could channel him. Then he asked the Headmaster to give it to me – and he did. See ... there's really no great mystery at all."

"Let's review some of your activities," said Hermione – totally ignoring Rick's attempts at a psychic explanation. She was working her way down a highlighted summary list. "We'll start with how you dealt with those Death Eaters who attacked the train on the way to Hogwarts."

"But, err, that was Professor Dumbledore," protested Rick. "You heard him ordering everyone to stay in their compartments."

"Yes. I did – or at I least thought I did. However when we got to Hogwarts I discovered that the Headmaster had been here all the time – I made some enquiries. You locked Harry in his compartment to stop him getting off the train, impersonated the Headmaster, and then somehow managed to dispose of twenty Death Eaters – rather impressive, I must say. I suppose you have an invisibility cloak or something like that."

"But, there is nothing supernatural about that," continued Hermione. "Nor is there anything supernatural about Apparition! I guessed some time ago that you can Apparate and you subsequently admitted it. Of course it's completely illegal, as you're under-age and could not possibly have obtained a licence. I just can't understand why you haven't been picked up by the Ministry's detectors for illegal underage magic," she added, jotting down a note to this effect in her burgeoning dossier.

"And somehow, you are even able to Apparate at Hogwarts. Perhaps Professor Dumbledore modified the castle's Wards to allow it. There must be a logical explanation. It seems that I shall have to accept that 'Hogwarts, a History' isn't always right – at least not where you're concerned," she said in a tone of regret, just as a child might concede a cherished belief of childhood, such as the Tooth Fairy.

"You Apparated back to get your Potions things the first day, and then Apparated down to the dungeons, getting there before Harry and me. Then you answered all those questions from Snape." Hermione

picked a parchment out from her dossier and examined it carefully. It contained all of Snape's questions, along with notes on each one.

"I checked them out. The answers to some of these questions can only be found in books – or research papers – that you could not possibly have accessed."

"So how did I know the answers then?" asked Rick, becoming more and more nervous under the onslaught of Hermione's accusations.

"You plucked them straight out of Snape's mind. It's the only logical explanation – you're a Legilimens – aren't you? I think it's totally outrageous that you are allowed to do that in class. Why it's unethical, and unfair for the rest of us, who have to find things out the hard way."

"Oh," said Hermione suddenly, as another piece of the puzzle dropped into place. "I remember the first time we met, in Flourish and Blotts. I was watching you for several minutes, although you didn't notice me. You were walking along the shelves, running your finger along all the books. What exactly were you doing?"

"Err ... day dreaming?" said Rick weakly.

"Oh, no you weren't! I've read that Rowena Ravenclaw had an amazing gift. She just had to touch a book and she would immediately know its contents. No other witch or wizard has ever been known to possess that ability. But you do, don't you Rick?"

Rick remained mute, deciding that the best policy was to neither confirm nor deny Hermione's accusations.

"That explains your perfect knowledge in every subject. How you know things that you have no ... no right to know! It explains how you are able to quote 'Hogwarts, a History' – chapter and verse!"

"It's just not fair. How am I supposed to compete with someone who can absorb a book in seconds, or pull the answer to an examination question out of the teacher's mind?" Hermione's single-minded pursuit of unravelling the Mystery of Rick Godfry had temporarily

become sidetracked by her outrage at this enormous injustice that had been visited upon her.

“Who said we need to compete?” asked Rick, attempting to mollify her outrage. “Err, anyway, Professor Dumbledore knows all about me. If I do possess any unfair advantages, he’ll know about them.”

“And what about the other Professors? Do they know? Does anyone else know about your secret abilities?”

“No, only Professor Dumbledore – and apparently a bloodhound witch named Hermione Granger,” sighed Rick.

Hermione couldn’t help but smile a little at the compliment, and Rick’s pun. But then she immediately switched back to the main subject of her interrogation and was on the offensive, once more.

“You read Malfoy’s mind in Potions that day, didn’t you? That’s how you knew he’d put the powdered Death Caps into our Folliculus Rerverus Potion, and how you knew he had the envelope in his pocket,” she said, jotting these details down on a parchment as she spoke.

“And that’s how you knew that he was about to fling a Furnunculus Curse at me instead of casting a Shield Charm, that day in Defence Against the Dark Arts. Of course, I’d already worked out that it was you who’d thrown up the Reflecting Shield to protect me and send Malfoy’s curse back at him. But I couldn’t figure out how you knew what he was about to do,” added Hermione, making a further note.

“And then there were all those times when Malfoy and his Inquisitorial thugs were stalking us in the corridors. You always seemed to know what was going to happen. Come on Rick, admit it, you’re a Legilimens, you must be! It’s the only explanation.”

Rick tried to look away, but Hermione was determined to look him in the eye. She suddenly gasped. “Why Rick, that means that you can read my mind. You must know exactly what I’m thinking.... You must know exactly how I feel about ... everything,” she said, blushing fiercely and hiding her face in her hands.

“Look Hermione, I’m going to be completely honest with you on this one. It is true that I have err, some Legilimency abilities. I’ve used them to keep an eye, if you will, on Draco, Umbridge and anyone else who might pose a danger to Harry and our side.”

“And ... what else?” demanded Hermione.

“OK, well, I may have used them in class on some occasions to, err ... you know, get the right answer. I used them on Snape, as you guessed, when he gave me that grilling in our first Potions lesson. You cannot imagine how awful it is in there.”

“In where?”

“In Snape’s mind,” answered Rick, distastefully.

“Oh. So is he really on our side?” asked Hermione. “I’m sure you would have tried to find that out.”

“Yes and yes. Yes, I did try. And yes, he’s committed to Dumbledore – absolutely. But you have to believe me that I haven’t been going around just reading people’s minds without a good reason. I’ve only used Legilimency to protect Harry and help those on our side, not for my own curiosity and amusement ... or romantic interests.”

“So you haven’t been looking into the minds of any of us – your friends then?” asked Hermione, still suspicious.

“Umm, well, I do check Harry sometimes, like when we’re going to bed at night – just to make sure that he’s not planning to go out and fight a duel or something like that. Please don’t tell him – he’d be furious with me – I’m just trying to protect him. But that’s about it. If I’d been monitoring everyone, I would have picked up on Ron giving Pansy the password.”

“And what about me?” asked Hermione. “Have you been probing my mind?”

“No!” said Rick emphatically. “I’ve made a special point of not using Legilimency on you.”

“Why is that?” asked Hermione, curiously.

“Well ... umm, because I like ... umm, well, because of how I feel about you,” said Rick shyly.

Hermione blushed. She found herself feeling quite uncomfortable and quickly turned her attention back to the parchment with her highlighted summary list. “Did you really use Legilimency on Lucius Malfoy at the Quidditch match? I remember now that you claimed you did, but I didn’t believe you at the time. We were a hundred yards away from him. To use Legilimency, you need to be in very close proximity to the other person and you need to cast the Legilimens Spell, which you didn’t do.”

“Umm ... I guess there must be different kinds of Legilimency,” said Rick. “Look, Hermione, it’s really true that I’m psychic ... err, in a manner of speaking. Why won’t you believe me? The reason I can speed read like Rowena Ravenclaw is because I can contact her spirit.”

Hermione looked sceptically at Rick. She was looking for a rational, logical explanation of his powers, not one that involved the supernatural.

“And I really do have Empathetic Magic. That’s how I heard you calling me from the dungeon that night. I think it’s because of my connection with Helga Hufflepuff.”

“Oh, Piffle-puff! That’s what it is! All this mystical nonsense is just a big red herring, designed to throw me off the track,” said Hermione, defiantly. “I don’t know what alerted you to my plight that night in the dungeon – maybe it was just an intuition. And as for finding me, I suppose Professor Dumbledore has given you a magical map of Hogwarts, similar to Harry’s Marauders Map. After all, if Harry’s dad and his friends could create something like that, I’m sure Professor Dumbledore can.”

Rick realised that Hermione was simply not going to accept his hints at a supernatural source of his abilities; and there was no way that he was going to tell her the whole story. She would steadfastly refuse to believe anything that she could not understand or explain – unless he could provide scientific proof.

“OK,” said Rick. “How about we conduct a scientific experiment to determine whether or not I can actually contact Helga Hufflepuff?”

“But how are you going to prove something like that scientifically?” asked Hermione. “Wait a minute! I’ve got it! I’ll test you. I have several books which contain rather obscure information about her that doesn’t appear elsewhere.” She pulled several library books from her bag, holding them up for Rick to see, but not letting him touch them. “Have you read any of these?” she asked. “I want you to swear a Wizard’s Oath.”

“No,” said Rick, looking at the books. I haven’t read – or speed read - any of those books and I promise not to read the answers from your mind. I swear a Wizard’s Oath to it. Go on, ask away.”

“Alright,” agreed Hermione. “What was Helga Hufflepuff’s favourite flower?”

Rick closed his eyes and saw crocuses blooming at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. “The crocus.”

“What was her favourite bird?”

He saw a flock of swifts wheeling high over the lake. “The swift.”

“What was her mother’s maiden name?”

“Fawcett.”

“What was her favourite desert?”

“Gooseberry tart.”

“Her favourite drink?”

“Elderberry wine.”

“You promise you haven’t cheated?” said Hermione in defeat, resigned to the fact that Rick could answer every question she asked him.

“You know I couldn’t have broken my Wizard’s Oath, Hermione,” answered Rick. “The answers all came directly from Helga Hufflepuff, I promise you. So now that I’ve proved that I am able to contact Helga Hufflepuff, will you accept the possibility at least, that she could be assisting me to do Empathetic Magic? After all, she’s famous for it. I’d really like to learn more about the subject and I’m sure it will be useful for your special research paper.”

Hermione, too, was keen to learn more about Empathetic Magic. She realised that Rick was using her interest in it, to sidetrack her, to end her interrogation. She had learned a lot tonight and added some valuable notes to her dossier. It was obvious that Rick was not going to give in and divulge his secrets. She would have to figure it out for herself. Hermione knew she was making progress and that she would solve the puzzle of Rick Godfry sooner or later. He had been in quite a bit of discomfort at times, during her cross-examination. Hermione took pity on him, and decided not to subject him to further questioning – for tonight, at least.

“So how do you propose proving that you can do Empathetic Magic then?” asked Hermione.

“For the next week, at random times, I’d like you to try summoning me,” said Rick.

“Summon you? How? With my mind?”

“Well yes, and with your ... err, your feelings,” said Rick, finding it a little difficult to explain. “You need to feel that you really want me to be there with you. Write down the time and place. If I feel you summoning me, I’ll write down the time and where I think you are. Then, at the end of the week, we’ll compare notes.”

“All right, but no using your magic Hogwarts map to find me. You can only use Empathetic Magic. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Rick.

I know FFN has been in Read Only mode a lot of late and it wasn't possible to post Reviews. But, it's back to normal now ... YOU CAN REVIEW!!

My Enhanced Stats show that lots of people have been reading this fic ... but sadly, there are very few Reviews.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ... NOW!!

Chapter 12 - A Witch a Wizard and a Room of Requirement

“Rick, I would like you to spend the Christmas holidays with the Weasleys,” said Professor Dumbledore one evening when Rick had Apparated to his office. “Mrs. Weasley is demanding that I allow Harry to spend the holiday with them and ... well, she can be very persuasive, when she has her heart set on something. It would also be good for Harry’s morale. For reasons of his own safety, I had no alternative but to insist that he spend the whole summer holiday with the Dursleys. Mrs. Weasley has invited him, and I don’t want him to have to remain behind at Hogwarts this Christmas, as well.”

“But will he be safe, sir?”

“I believe so, especially if you are with him. The Hogwarts Express will be protected by a defensive shield. Members of the Order will escort you between King’s Cross station and the Burrow, which now serves as the backup headquarters for the Order, and has been heavily warded. Its defences are now equal to those of Grimmauld Place.”

“But the Weasleys may not want a stranger staying for Christmas,” said Rick, feeling a little uncomfortable about intruding on their family celebrations.

“Ah, I have already spoken with Molly about you and she is keen for you to come. ‘The more the merrier’, were her exact words as I recall. She wouldn’t hear of you spending Christmas all alone at Hogwarts, so far away from your home.”

My home? thought Rick. Yeah, it’s far away, that’s for sure. And not just because it may be on the other side of the planet – it was a different planet, a different time, a different reality.... Not that I’m complaining, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else but right here. But still ... Mrs. Weasley has no idea just how far from home I really am.

“What did you tell her about me?” asked Rick.

“Just the ‘usual story’. And that you are a good friend of Ron and Harry, and played an important part in the recent student uprising.

She knows nothing of your powers, or indeed, that you saved her daughter's life in the Quidditch match against Slytherin."

A friend of Ron, thought Rick. Who would have thought a month ago that he could be described as a friend of Ron! But it was true. After confessing how he had been duped by Pansy into divulging the Gryffindor password, Ron seemed to have had a 'Road to Damascus' experience, and was, at last, able to see Rick without prejudice. They had been comrades since the struggle against Umbridge; and even though Ron was unaware of how much Rick had done, he now recognised him as a powerful and valuable ally.

There was still some discomfort between them around Hermione. While there was nothing overt between Rick and Hermione, it was pretty obvious that they liked each other, and they were going to the Yule Ball together.

Ron had finally been forced to accept that Hermione loved him as a friend and a brother, and not the way he would have preferred. However, since Padma had invited him to the Yule Ball, his romantic fantasies seemed to have shifted somewhat from Hermione to Padma; not to mention some of the other witches who had also invited him.

Rick was aware, however, that even if Ron's feelings towards Hermione were now more 'brotherly', he still needed to be careful. He remembered how protective Ron was of Ginny, and how he had 'seen off' Dean Thomas.

After a week of their Empathetic Magic experiment, Rick and Hermione compared notes. Hermione had attempted to summon Rick thirty times. Rick had detected eleven of them, accurately identifying the time and the location from which she had summoned him.

"You're absolutely sure that you didn't cheat or use your magic Hogwarts map, or whatever it is, to find me?" asked Hermione. She was stunned at Rick's success and could no longer deny the fact that Rick could do Empathetic Magic.

“I promise,” said Rick, smiling. “But the experiment isn’t over yet.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione, curiously.

“Well, eleven out of thirty isn’t all that good. I’d like to see if it’s possible to improve upon it,” explained Rick.

“But it’s amazing that you even sensed me summoning you once! It’s quite extraordinary. And remember, I was just summoning you for experimental purposes. It wouldn’t have been as forceful as if I was really in distress – like when Malfoy had me captive in the dungeon.”

“I think there’s a way to strengthen both your summons and my receptivity,” said Rick, thoughtfully.

“But, how?” asked Hermione.

“I’ll show you,” said Rick, smiling, “but not here in the common room. Come on, let’s go.”

“Go where?” asked Hermione, puzzled.

“To the Room of Requirement,” said Rick, softly.

“But why do we have to go all the way to the Room of Requirement?”

“Trust me,” said Rick. “And anyway, it’s not that far – if you know how to find it.”

Hermione was curious as to what Rick meant, so she agreed to go with him. It was still an hour until the night curfew.

Rick turned left down a corridor, not more than twenty yards from the Gryffindor portrait hole. He touched the wall and a large polished door, with a golden handle, suddenly appeared. “After you ... witches first,” said Rick chivalrously, opening the door for an astonished Hermione.

“But this can’t be the Room of Requirement,” said Hermione, in confusion. “The entrance is opposite that ridiculous tapestry of

Barnabas the Barmy trying to turn trolls into ballerinas – it's nowhere near here!"

"The Room of Requirement," said Rick, with a smile, "is where ever you require it to be. Just as it's always how ever you require it to be."

Hermione entered the room and looked around. Most of the light came from a cosy fire crackling in a large fireplace along one wall. In front of the fire was a very large and comfy looking leather couch. On either side of the couch were low tables, each with an elegant candelabra and vases of beautiful flowers upon them. On one table there was a pitcher of pumpkin juice and two glasses. On the other, there were several plates of delicious looking pastries.

"Wow!" said Hermione. "The Room of Requirement never looked so inviting."

Rick and Hermione sat down, taking in the soft ambience of the room.

"Well," said Hermione curiously. "So how do you think Empathetic Magic can be strengthened? I've never read anywhere that it's possible."

"Well," said Rick, "the way I see it, Empathetic Magic depends upon the feelings between the people involved."

"Yes, that's obviously the crucial factor," agreed Hermione. "A mother's love for her baby is fierce and powerful," she mused.

"Then there was Helga Hufflepuff being summoned by her lover," added Rick.

"So, if you could strengthen the feelings between two people, the Empathetic Magic between them would increase," said Hermione, thoughtfully. "Yes, that makes sense. But how can you strengthen the feelings?"

Hermione had been thinking hypothetically up to this point. Suddenly she realised that the two people in question, for the purposes of their experiment at least, were her and Rick. Hermione looked up at Rick,

her mouth dropped open as she suddenly began to suspect where this might all be leading.

Rick, meanwhile, was trying very hard to convince himself that understanding his powers of Empathetic Magic was really very important to the cause. Dumbledore himself, suggested that I investigate my link with Hermione. So it must be important – important enough, to justify me using my charm. This is all for the Cause, he told himself.

“Why, you just want to snog! Don’t you?!” demanded Hermione, outraged.

“Yeah, I’d really like to,” responded Rick candidly, without thinking. “But ... but, no ... that’s not what I meant! That’s not really what this is about, at all. I mean ... what I mean is, I really do want to learn more about Empathetic Magic. I think it could be really important to investigate it and ... err, I want to see what happens if I, err ... kiss you,” he mumbled.

“What? You want to kiss me?” gasped Hermione.

“You don’t understand,” said Rick desperately. “What I mean is, if we were to kiss, then, err ... our feelings for each other might grow. And then the Empathetic Magic between us would grow stronger. Don’t you see? Then we could do our summoning experiment for another week and see if there is any change in the success rate. Just think of it as a something we’re doing ... err, purely in the interests of science,” rationalised Rick, hoping to appeal to Hermione’s insatiable thirst for knowledge.

“So you don’t really want to kiss me then? It’s all just in the interests of science?” said Hermione, arching an eyebrow.

Rick realised he was now trapped. If he said he didn’t want to kiss her, Hermione would probably slap his face and walk out. But if he said he did want to kiss her, she would also probably slap his face and walk out. Rick now understood what it felt like to be on the ‘horns of a dilemma’ – not very good.

He couldn't say yes, and he couldn't say no, so he just did it. He leaned over and kissed her. Rick had dreamed of this moment for a long time – both in 'this life' at Hogwarts and, also often, in his 'past life'. But it wasn't anything like the way he had fantasised about it.

It was the most magical moment of his life – either life. He felt himself flow together with Hermione. It was a bit like the experience in Dumbledore's office when he took Gryffindor's wand. It was that same feeling of connectedness. He felt totally connected with Hermione, and also connected with everything at the same time. Rick was stunned.

Hermione had stopped thinking by the time Rick's lips had touched hers. She had looked into his eyes and felt him enveloping her. Her thoughts had stopped, and once she stopped thinking, analysing, assessing, and evaluating the situation, it was easy. She really wanted this. She welcomed his kiss, and met his intense feelings and passion with equal intensity. Like Rick, she too felt the powerful connection between them. It was as if their souls had somehow merged, both together with each other and with all existence.

By the time Rick and Hermione got back to the deserted Gryffindor common room, it was well past curfew. They didn't want to part, to go their separate ways, to their separate dormitories – so they sat together in front of the fireplace.

"Rick, I think we should keep our ... our relationship to ourselves for now," said Hermione. "I don't even understand it myself ... I mean, what's happened between us tonight. I certainly don't want to try explaining it to anyone else ... or face a grilling from Lavender and Parvati, or Ginny – or anyone!"

"Yeah, I understand how you feel," replied Rick, putting his arm around Hermione and snuggling up close to her. "I feel exactly the same way. Let's keep it our secret. I sure don't want to have to face Ron when he finds out ... we're just getting to be friends."

“Rick, can you imagine what all those witches with crushes on you are going to do to me if the news gets out? I’ve already been getting death glares, ever since they found out that you are going to the Yule Ball with me. I think there would be some serious interest in voodoo around here, and a ready market for Hermione Granger dolls.”

“Agreed,” said Rick. “Life will be a whole lot easier for both of us, if we keep what’s between us ... to ourselves.”

“Well, I just hope we can hide it,” said Hermione. “The bond between us is so strong. I mean ... I never imagined that it was possible to feel so close, so much a part of ... so connected with another person. I’ve never been in love before,” she continued shyly, turning her face away from Rick and staring into the dying embers of the fire. “I’ve read some of those romance novels, and I know all about the emotions, and passions, and fireworks that are supposed to happen. Well, they sure did happen! But there is something else as well, something quite different, that’s not in the books. But I can’t explain it – there are no words to describe it.”

“Hermione Granger at a loss for words,” quipped Rick. “I feel I’ve been paid the ultimate compliment.... But seriously, I feel the same way as you, and I’m also at a loss to describe it. We seem to have bonded together at some very deep level. It’s more than love, it’s ... I don’t know, spiritual ... magical! The only thing I know for sure, is that it happened, in part, because of my ... umm, ‘special magical powers’ – I’m sure of it.”

Hermione sighed. “And you still won’t tell me about them, will you? You’re still keeping secrets from me, aren’t you Rick? Why can’t you just be open and honest with me – why can’t you tell me everything?” she asked in frustration.

“Hermione, please believe me! I do want to tell you everything. It’s not easy keeping so many secrets from everyone; from my friends ... and especially from you. There’s nothing I’d like better than to unburden myself, and tell you the whole truth about myself – everything. Do you have any idea how lonely it is for me? Can you imagine what it’s like having to constantly hide behind barriers? Do you realise how hard it is to maintain this? I have to keep track of what a whole lot of different

people know about me and try to be consistent and not contradict myself. Do you really think I enjoy having to conceal the truth?" asked Rick, sighing heavily.

"But why do you have to?" asked Hermione. "And anyway, I thought you said that Professor Dumbledore knew all your secrets."

"Professor Dumbledore does know everything – and he told me that I should keep as much secret as possible. Please trust me, Hermione."

Hermione sighed in resignation. "I do trust you, Rick. You've saved Harry and me enough times to earn my trust. But it's a bit scary. I feel so close to you now, almost like I'm no longer a separate individual. Yet, at some levels, I just don't know you at all! Where did you really come from? I don't believe that story about you being an orphan from the remote mountains of New Zealand – it's just too convenient."

"What are you?" she continued. "It's like when I discovered that there really was something other than just Muggles, that there really were witches and wizards, who can really do magic – and that I was one of them. But you are just like some other category again – all by yourself. You break all the rules; you Apparate around Hogwarts; you do magic which no one has ever heard of – that's not in any of the books! And now there's this strange magical bond between us."

"How did you get all your extraordinary magical powers? Why, I don't even know what all those powers are, or what kind of magic you are capable of. You keep it all hidden, and it's just so ... frustrating!" said Hermione, resentfully.

"Maybe you should just think of me as a Wizard of Requirement," said Rick, trying to lighten things up.

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione, puzzled.

"Well," explained Rick, "just like the Room of Requirement manifests because it's required, I'm here at Hogwarts, because I'm required."

"By who?" asked Hermione, confused.

“By everyone on the side of the Light. Professor Dumbledore, Harry ... maybe even you,” said Rick with a grin.

“Rick, that’s silly.”

“Is it? If the Room of Requirement can manifest, and manifest in the way that it’s needed, then why not a person?” asked Rick.

“But Rick, a room isn’t like a person. It isn’t born, it doesn’t have a life, a history, all the memories of childhood, growing up and all of that,” protested Hermione.

“Neither do I,” said Rick.

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione, flabbergasted. “Don’t you remember your life before you came to Hogwarts?”

“No,” said Rick, shaking his head, “I don’t.”

They were both silent for a few moments.

“I’ve got it!” exclaimed Hermione suddenly. “You’re a Time Traveller, aren’t you? It’s the only logical explanation,” she said, beginning to regroup her ideas about Rick around this intriguing new concept. “You’ve come from the future, most probably, although it could be the past – no, it must be the future! That’s why you can do magic which no one in this time knows anything about. You’ve come to help the Light battle Voldemort and the Dark forces. You’ve come to avert a terrible calamity that has befallen the wizarding world in your time, as a result of Voldemort’s victory in this time. I’m sure I’m right! It explains everything! What year have you come from, Rick?”

“Hermione, you are one clever witch, you know that?” said Rick. “You are right about the reason I have come. It is to prevent Voldemort from winning. Because right now, the odds are stacked heavily in his favour. But I have not come from the future – or from the past. I’m not a Time Traveller, I’m a Reality Traveller.”

“A Reality Traveller? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that I haven’t come from a different time, I’ve come from a different reality, a different universe, if you like,” explained Rick.

“But that’s not possible ... is it?” asked Hermione, no longer quite sure of anything – at least not where Rick was concerned.

“Well, before you used the Time-Turner in your third year,” said Rick, “you would have said that Time Travel wasn’t possible. Maybe you are just going to have to learn that nothing is impossible.”

“Rick, how do you know about the Time-Turner?” asked Hermione, suspiciously. “Only Harry, Ron and Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore know about that, aside from me. I didn’t tell you about it, and I can’t think why any of them would. Who told you, or have you been doing some extensive reading – in my memories?” she demanded.

“I did read about it Hermione, but not in your memories. It was in a book,” said Rick.

“Why, of course!” said Hermione. “It’s a book you read in the future, which hasn’t been written yet. Goodness, it feels strange to think of myself appearing in a book. But it all makes sense now,” she added, fitting it neatly in with her Rick, the Time Traveller thesis. “What was this book called?”

“‘Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban’. It’s all about your third year at Hogwarts, about Sirius Black and everything that happened,” said Rick.

“Yes, of course,” said Hermione. “It’s so obvious now. Harry’s famous – there are bound to be loads of books written about him and his adventures here at Hogwarts.”

Then Hermione had a terrible and devastating realisation. She burst into tears. Rick hugged her and asked gently, “Hermione, what’s the matter, why are you crying?”

“Because,” sobbed Hermione, “if you’re a Time Traveller, then you’ll return to your own time someday – without me. I don’t think I could

bear being separated from you. It would be like having a part of myself, of my soul, torn away.”

Rick held Hermione close, comforting her. “I won’t leave you Hermione, ever – I promise,” said Rick reassuringly. “Like I told you, I’m not a Time Traveller, I’m a Reality Traveller. I’ve come from another reality, and there is no way I can go back.”

“Why not?” asked Hermione, not sure if she believed there was such a thing as a Reality Traveller. If there was, she didn’t understand what it might be.

“Because I died in the reality I came from. That’s why I can’t go back. I’m sure you’ve heard of reincarnation. Well, I died and then I ... sort of got ... reincarnated into this world, this reality. I guess it’s all pretty normal, if you believe in reincarnation,” said Rick. “The only unusual thing was that I wasn’t reincarnated as a baby, but as a sixteen year old boy – on August the thirty-first, this year, 1996.”

“Do you remember what year it was when you died?” asked Hermione, dropping her latest theory – Rick the Time Traveller – and the countless preceding ones. Rick was telling her the truth, bizarre as it was. I know without a doubt, that what he is saying is true, she thought to herself. But how am I able to know that? It must be some kind of Empathetic Magic – it’s because of the link between us.

“No, I’ve no idea what year it was,” said Rick. “I don’t even know where in the world I lived or any of the personal details of my life. What my parents or brothers or sisters were like – or if I even had any. I don’t even remember what I was like, how old I was when I died, or even what my name was – it’s all a total blank.”

“Wait a minute,” said Hermione. “You said you read a book called ‘Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban’. How can you remember that ... and anyway, how could there possibly be a book about Harry Potter in the Reality you came from? That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

Rick proceeded to tell Hermione everything that he could remember of his previous life. He told her about the Harry Potter books and

movies. About how amazingly popular they were in that world, where there was no magic, only hard, cold, impersonal science.

“I was totally obsessed with Harry Potter and his magical world,” explained Rick. “It was the most important thing in my life. That much I can remember. I guess that’s why I can remember it – because it was so important to me. I lived in that world – well, it was this world really – it was more real to me than what was called the ‘real world’. Professor Dumbledore explained to me that in some religions they believe that your thoughts and dreams and desires create the world that you reincarnate into after you die, and that’s how I ended up here.”

Hermione was fascinated. “Yes, I’ve read some of the Tibetan ideas about death and reincarnation. Then there’s the ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’, which is really a manual for guiding the departed soul into the next life, it’s mind-boggling really. In a way, we create the next world that we’re born into, and yet it was there all along.”

“You’re dead right!” said Rick, “It is mind-boggling – especially when it happens to you.”

“I mean this world was always here, just the way it is now, with absolutely no reference to the world you came from,” continued Hermione, warming to the topic. “But from your perspective, you actually created it all – with the help of the author who wrote the books, of course, because the author really created it out of his or her own imagination to start with. It really is ... mind-boggling.”

“So that’s how you knew my name when you tripped over me in Flourish and Blotts that day. You knew me from the books,” said Hermione. “Am I just the same as in the books then?”

“You’re exactly the same,” said Rick. “After all, I created you from whatever image I had of you in my previous life. You were beautiful then – and you’re beautiful now. I’ve been in love with you for so long, Hermione. I’ve dreamed about you for so long. I’ve wanted you for so long, you have no idea....”

“I think it was my love for you that made my obsession with this world so strong – strong enough to draw me into it. If I manage to make a difference in the battle between the Light and the Dark, then you can claim the credit for it.”

Hermione snuggled up closer to Rick. It was nice to feel so loved. Loved with such desire, that it had drawn Rick to her, from another world, another reality.

“I guess that sort of makes me your Witch of Requirement then,” said Hermione with a smile. “I came into existence – along with this whole world – because you wanted me.” Hermione was silent for a while, before suddenly asking, “But Rick, that still doesn’t explain all your amazing powers. In fact, it means that you were a Muggle ... that you had no magic at all. So where did all your magic come from?”

In for a penny, in for a pound, thought Rick, The game’s up now, I might as well tell Hermione everything. She’s not going to give me a moment’s peace until she knows the whole story.

Rick proceeded to tell Hermione what had happened, on that fateful day when he appeared in Dumbledore’s office. He told her of Godric Gryffindor’s message from the spirit realm, and of his astounding experience upon touching Gryffindor’s wand. How a connection had been forged, between him, and the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light.

“Then they are the source of all your magic and all your power,” said Hermione in awe and wonder. “You have all the magic of the most powerful witches and wizards who ever lived – well, the good ones at least. Rick, you must be the most powerful magical being that ever existed!” said Hermione, shaking her head in incredulity.

“Yes,” sighed Rick. “But along with all those gifts comes a very heavy responsibility. I have to make sure that we win – that’s what I’m here for. I really am a Wizard of Requirement, just like I said before, and it’s a most formidable requirement.”

“Rick, you can do it. With all the powers you possess, I know you can, and I’m going to help you if you’ll let me,” said Hermione, with determination.

“But I can’t kill Voldemort,” sighed Rick. “I can’t kill anyone. I can’t even hate anyone – not even Draco Malfoy! I feel connected to everyone and everything. It would be like killing a part of myself. So you see I’m not omnipotent. I have my limits. I can help Harry, I can protect him; but in the end, it’s Harry who will have to destroy Voldemort, not me.”

“Just as the Prophecy predicts,” said Hermione. “But Rick, there are lots of ways of dealing with enemies, besides killing them —” Hermione abruptly stopped. “But, of course!” she exclaimed, looking at Rick in wonder, as the penny finally dropped. “How could I have been so stupid not to see it before? You’re the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor – it’s so obvious now! You Squibbed Lucius Malfoy and Umbridge. You can’t kill anyone, so you Squib them, it’s absolutely brilliant!” she said in admiration.

“Actually,” laughed Rick, “I got the idea of Squibbing from you. Remember how you told me about that book in which Germaine Pankhurst claimed that Circe once cast a spell on an evil sorcerer, and destroyed his power. Well, I figured that since she turned to the Light, I probably have her gifts, so I tried it on Lucius Malfoy – and it worked a treat.”

Rick told Hermione about all the other powers he had discovered so far. “But I’m still learning more about my powers every day,” said Rick. “I mean I was really serious about experimenting with Empathetic Magic. It wasn’t just a clever ploy to kiss you – although I desperately wanted to – and I’m awfully glad that I did.”

“Yes, me too,” agreed Hermione throwing her arms around him.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 13 - The Yule Ball

The last day of term finally arrived, and with it the eagerly awaited Yule Ball. As they dressed for the ball, the wizards were all paying meticulous attention to their appearance. After all, the slipper was on the other foot tonight, the witches got to choose the wizards they wanted to dance with – so they really wanted to look their very best.

“Boy, wouldn’t it be embarrassing if no one asked you to dance – the whole night,” said Neville, echoing the anxieties of the other sixth-year boys, who were busily, and rather awkwardly, preening themselves in front of the long mirror on the wall of the boys’ bathroom.

“Now then boys, you have nothing to fear. Enough of your wallflower worries, the witches will find you irresistible, I’m sure,” said the mirror encouragingly, delighted to find itself the centre of attention. Usually the mirror was lucky if it got as much as a cursory glance, from one day to the next, from most of them.

“Harry dear, if you put anymore of that Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion on your head, there will be an oil slick following you wherever you go... it could make dancing dangerous. Let it go dear, your hair just isn’t meant to lie flat.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right,” said Harry, sighing with resignation, and then submerging his head in a basin of water to wash it all out – much to the amusement of the others. Rick blasted Harry with a heavy-duty Drying Charm when he came up for air. Rick, himself, was being especially careful not to step in front of the mirror while everyone was in the bathroom.

These mirrors mean well, he thought to himself, but they’re really a pain sometimes – especially when they embarrass you with their flattery in front of your mates – how come all the mirrors around here have to be female, anyway?

The long mirror in their bathroom was particularly uninhibited; and Rick didn’t want to have it sweet-talking him tonight, when all his

friends were, for once, feeling very self-conscious about their appearance.

“Hey, Neville,” said Dean. “You must be the luckiest wizard in the school. How on earth did you manage to get yourself invited by Susan Bones? Hey guys – I reckon Neville here must have some hidden talents.”

“Yeah,” said Seamus, “he must have. Boy, I sure wouldn’t mind taking Susan Bones to the ball – or up to the Astronomy Tower. She’s sure filled out rather nicely of late. That is one foxy witch – you’re a lucky bloke, Neville, you know that?”

“Err, yeah,” replied Neville, blushing fiercely. He’d been stunned when Susan had invited him. She was the subject of the fantasies of many of the wizards – himself included. But it had never occurred to him that she might like him. He certainly wouldn’t have dared to invite her, had it been the other way around. Yes, there’s a lot to be said for a Witches’ Prerogative, he thought happily to himself.

“Seamus,” said Ron. “Did you realise that we both got invited by the same witches who we invited to the Yule Ball in fourth year?”

“Yeah mate,” bragged Seamus, “Lavender obviously knows what she likes. Although, as I recall, you were a real prat to Padma. You didn’t even ask her to dance once, the whole night. Maybe she decided that you’ve grown up a bit since then and decided to give you another chance.”

“Err,” said Ron suddenly becoming very nervous. “You don’t suppose that she just invited me so she can pay me back – and do the same thing to me? Damn, I was so chuffed when she invited me that it never occurred to me she might’ve been planning to get even.”

“Relax, mate,” said Rick reassuringly. “Padma likes you, believe me, I ... um, I know. It’s probably that brilliant mind of yours she’s after – she’s quite the brainy one herself, you know,” added Rick.

“She’s welcome to the rest of me as well,” said Ron grinning. In truth, Padma’s mind did attract him, but it wasn’t her mind that had been

occupying his thoughts and fantasies of late. “Speaking of which,” said Ron, deciding to shift the subject away from himself, “Didn’t you get invited by Vicky Frobisher, Dean? Now there’s a witch who really knows how to handle a broom.”

Dean grinned; the old “broom euphemism” was a favourite amongst teenage wizards. “Yeah, Ron. I heard that she did better than you in the Quidditch tryouts for Keeper last year; she’s quite the athlete, I hear.”

“You do know that she’s also a real wiz with Charms, don’t you Dean?” said Seamus. “You better behave yourself with her, my boy, or she might just decide you’re a handsome prince – who desperately deserves to be turned into an ugly toad,” he added, laughing.

“Come on,” said Ron. “We’d better get going. I know it’s a Witches’ Prerogative and all, but I don’t think it means that we have the prerogative of keeping the witches waiting like they do to us. I’ve got to get over to Ravenclaw and I don’t want to keep Padma waiting. I’m going to do it right this time.”

When they got down to the common room, there was no sign of the witches. The younger students were back from their Yule Party – happy, exhausted, and bursting. The younger wizards seemed to have opted for an early night after the copious consumption of the afternoon, but the witches were sitting around chattering in groups, waiting to see the older witches and wizards all dressed up for their ball. They seemed suitably impressed when the sixth-year boys made their entrance and Rick, as usual, was the bashful centre of their attention.

“What is it with girls,” grumbled Harry after fifteen minutes had passed, and still the witches hadn’t put in an appearance.

“I think they do it deliberately,” said Seamus, “to heighten our anticipation, you know. Hey, I just caught a rumour that the mystery band for tonight was spotted entering the castle – you will not believe who Dumbledore’s got – he’s totally lost it this time.”

“Who is it?” the others all asked.

“Quentin Quaffle and the Broom Boys.”

“I do not believe it,” exclaimed Dean. “That’s rather risqué for a school ball isn’t it?”

“Who are they?” asked Neville. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“That’s because you’re not a witch,” said Dean. “Witches go crazy over them. They’re one of the up and coming boy bands, if you get my drift,” said Dean, with a sly wink. “They’re all the rage at Witches Nights and that sort of thing. Guess it’s all part of the Witches’ Prerogative theme. I imagine that they’ve been told to tone down their act a bit though – some of their stage antics are apparently pretty outrageous.”

“It’s all very well for the girls,” complained Seamus. “They’ll be drooling all over the band and ignoring us. They might not even ask us to dance.”

But the discussion about the band ended abruptly at that point, because the Gryffindor witches had begun to make their entrance. They descended the stairs from the girls’ dormitories at carefully-timed intervals, to give each witch her moment of glory in the limelight. It was all a bit theatrical, but appreciated nonetheless by the audience gathered in the common room. They all looked absolutely stunning and quite transformed from their everyday appearances.

Parvati and Lavender were no great shakes academically, but when it came to cosmetic magic and glammers, their knowledge and expertise were legendary. They had given all the Gryffindor witches a special makeover for the night.

The transformation was particularly noticeable with witches, like Hermione, who rarely bothered much with their appearance. Rick stood gaping open-mouthed as Hermione descended the stairs. She was utterly stunning. Her hair was braided and swept up, revealing all the beauty of her face. Rick had to resist the urge to throw his arms around her and plant kisses all down her neck and bare shoulders. Too late, he realised that he had unintentionally deluged her with his

charm. It was going to be all but impossible to keep it under control with the way she looked.

“You’re the most beautiful witch in the world,” he said softly in her ear as she took his arm. Hermione blushed all the way down her neck, where Rick, seeing that no one was watching, planted a quick kiss.

“Come on,” said Hermione. “Let’s go the ball, while I can still resist the temptation of dragging you off to the Room of Requirement.”

When Rick entered the Great Hall, with Hermione on his arm, he noticed that the four long House tables had been replaced by many smaller round tables that were clustered around the perimeter of the hall, leaving the centre free for dancing. In place of the teachers’ table was a glitzy stage, all ready for the band.

Upon the tables were elegant silver candelabra, giving off a soft romantic light. The enchanted ceiling had turned to an opaque golden colour for the evening. In fact, it looked as if it were made of pure gold, and, suspended beneath it were dozens of ornate crystal chandeliers. The whole effect was one of baroque opulence and grandeur. There were many Oohs and Ahs as the couples entered the transformed hall.

The sixth-year Gryffindors and their partners all sat together at one table. Ginny was looking absolutely ravishing. Her mane of bright red hair fell with striking effect on bare milky-white shoulders, with long twists of flaming hair hanging in front of each ear. Tonight, thought Rick, Ginny won’t have any trouble captivating Harry’s attention – that’s for sure!

In fact, Harry was looking at her, mesmerised, as if he had never really seen her properly before. Rick just hoped Ginny realised that no matter how much Harry liked her, nothing was likely to come of it anytime soon. How sad, he thought. For the ‘Boy Who Lived’, even normal things, like having a girlfriend, are too dangerous – for the girl. Ginny really would be better off finding someone else to love, reflected Rick sadly.

Rick's thoughts were interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. It was Pansy Parkinson, in a hot pink robe that left very little to the imagination. Rick hadn't noticed that Quentin Quaffle and the Broom Boys were now on stage and starting to strut their stuff. Rick may not have noticed – but the witches certainly had. They were gazing dreamily as the seven very handsome and scantily dressed wizards pouted and posed before their adoring audience.

"It looks like they're about to play, Rick. May I have the pleasure of the first dance?" purred Pansy in her most seductive voice.

Rick had to think quickly, he really wanted to have the first dance with Hermione. "Err ... yeah. I'd love to dance with you Pansy, but maybe a bit later. Hermione already has me booked for the first dance," he lied. Pansy smiled at him, then turned a death glare on Hermione as Rick stood up and pulled back Hermione's chair, helping her to her feet.

"Rick Godfry, you're a terrible liar," she chided him, as he led her onto the dance floor. "And that's the second time you've assumed my Witches' Prerogative," she said feeling slightly annoyed.

"Would you prefer to give Pansy the pleasure of the first dance with me?" asked Rick, smiling sweetly and putting one arm around Hermione and taking her hand in his, as they began to dance.

"No," she said, smiling back. "Oh Rick! You are just so irresistible, what can I do?" she said, squeezing his hand. "And where did you learn to dance like that? You're so ... smooth, and sensual."

"Looks like I received more than just magical gifts," said Rick, smiling and drawing Hermione nearer. "You're not so shabby yourself in the dancing department. Who would have thought that Hogwarts' best and brightest bookworm would turn out to be the witch who wows the wizards on the dance floor?"

"Stop being silly," giggled Hermione, rather pleased at the compliment.

“I’m not being silly,” said Rick. “Don’t look now, but we seem to be the centre of attention. And I’m pretty sure that all those wizards who are gazing longingly in our direction are longing for you, not me – at least, I certainly hope so!”

Hermione looked around and blushed. Rick was right. “Well, Rick, you ought to be proud of yourself. You have more witches looking wistfully at you than at those ‘toy boys’ on the stage.”

“I’ll say one thing for Quincy Quaffler and The Brush Boys or whatever they call themselves, they’re not just a bunch of pretty faces, they really can play,” said Rick. “I just hope they do some slow numbers. You look so beautiful tonight – I can’t wait to hold you close – very close.”

Rick got his wish – well, the first part of it anyway. They did play some slow numbers, but sadly for him, he didn’t get to hold Hermione close. The minute the first dance was over, Pansy was onto him.

“It must be my turn now,” she said, smiling enticingly at Rick.

“Excuse me!” said Hermione, proprietarily. “But we’re still dancing.”

“Oh, but it’s Witches’ Prerogative tonight, you know,” replied Pansy coolly.

“So what?” demanded Hermione.

“Well, normally, a wizard can approach a couple and say to the wizard, ‘may I cut in’. You’ve probably never experienced it yourself,” said Pansy, snidely. “But I’m quite used to it. It’s considered very poor form for the wizard to object to giving up his partner. But since it’s Witches’ Prerogative tonight, it’s the Witches’ Prerogative to ‘cut in’.” With that, she grabbed Rick’s arm and dragged him away from a furious Hermione.

Hermione tried to get Rick back at the end of the dance, determined to steal him away from that tart, Pansy, but it was hopeless. A solid wall of witches formed around Rick, towards the end of every dance,

as they vied to pounce on him for the next one. Hermione couldn't even get close to Rick, and he was too polite to refuse anyone.

Rick really wanted to be with Hermione, but he soon realised that there was no chance of that. Most of the witches with crushes on him had probably never spoken to him, and were never likely to get another opportunity to make contact. Tonight was their one chance to be with Rick, for a few minutes at least; and they were determined to make the most of it. The witches were overjoyed.

Severus Snape, however, was anything but overjoyed. He loathed school balls with a passion. A bunch of hyperactive, hormone-fuelled teenagers, totally out of control, he thought to himself. As a student at Hogwarts, he had been friendless, melancholy, self-conscious, and awkward. He had shunned school balls, parties and every other kind of social activity. And now he was obliged to baby-sit this lot – there was no justice!

Out of his memory came unwanted images of the past. James Potter and Sirius Black – he didn't know which one he hated the most. For seven years, they had taunted and tormented him for their amusement. But it wasn't that which had earned them his lifelong enmity.

No, the true cause of his hatred was bitter envy. They were everything that he was not. Handsome, sporting heroes, successful, popular – but most of all, the witches all seemed to adore the pair of arrogant, conceited Gryffindors. While he, himself, led a solitary, miserable existence – lonely, unloved, and unwanted. He had been spurned by the witches, during those hypersensitive and emotionally turbulent teenage years. It was hardly surprising that he had been such easy prey for the Dark Lord's recruiters.

Snape really didn't want to think about all of that – the progression from his Purgatory at Hogwarts, to his own personal Hell with Voldemort's Death Eaters. Where did those thoughts come from? he asked himself. He usually managed to keep them well buried, beneath his angry, arrogant, superior persona. What triggered these indulgent thoughts of self-pity? he wondered, as he tried to repress them. And then he saw the answer, right in front of him – Rick Godfry.

There in the centre of the dance floor was Rick Godfry, surrounded by at least twenty witches, all vying with each other to be his partner for the next dance. They were starting to get out-of-hand. Several of them were completely motionless – it looked like they'd been hit by an Impedimenta or Immobilus Jinx.

Sirius Black! thought Snape to himself. Of course! That's who Godfry reminds me of. The similarities are so obvious – how did I miss seeing it before? The same irresistible attraction to witches; the same carefree attitude, he thought with disgust. Everything comes effortlessly to Godfry – it all just falls into his lap – it was exactly the same with Black. No wonder he had instinctively disliked Godfry from the very first moment. Plus, he was a Gryffindor – and close to a Potter – the parallels were unmistakable.

“Stand aside!” bellowed Snape, as he pushed his way through the gaggle of witches surrounding Rick.

“Mr. Godfry,” he said, as he pulled two of his fourth-year Slytherin witches off Rick. “What is the meaning of this unseemly melee? You appear to be causing a riot.”

Rick was actually relieved at Snape's intervention. He was starting to feel rather claustrophobic, and was becoming desperate to escape from his over-enthusiastic suitors. So desperate, that he had briefly been tempted to Apparate away.

“I don't know what's gotten into these witches tonight,” said Rick. “They've gone quite crazy! Perhaps the choice of band wasn't such a good one; they seem to have all the witches rather ... err ... wound up.”

“Don't try passing the blame elsewhere, Mr. Godfry. There is only one riot happening in this hall and it is happening around you – and no one else. I believe a punishment is in order. You need to be put in your place, Mr. Black – err, Godfry. Ever since you came to this school, you've been nothing but trouble. I warned the Headmaster. You think you're just so wonderful, don't you? God's gift to witches! Why they should be attracted to a puny, insignificant person such as

yourself, I have no idea ... although I have my suspicions,” he added darkly, glaring hard at Rick.

“I have suspected for some time now that you are using Dark Magic – perhaps some variant of the Imperius Curse? There is something amiss about you Mr. Godfry and it makes me very suspicious. By all rights, you should be far behind your peers, in every subject. Yet unaccountably, you appear to be at the top of every class – even surpassing that insufferable Know-It-All Granger in some. Yet, you do not appear to be making any effort at all. How exactly would you explain all of this, Mr. Godfry?”

“Err, I don’t really know, sir,” said Rick, feeling most uncomfortable. Well, at least the witches weren’t daring to approach him with Snape about; that was one consolation. Rick became aware that Snape was trying to probe his mind. He had his wand in his hand and had quietly uttered “Legilimens”. Rick kept him out – he had to. But this just made Snape all the more suspicious. He glared hard at Rick.

“If I catch you using Dark Magic, Godfry, you’ll be out of this school – I promise you. And if it’s anything illegal, I’ll make sure that you end up where you belong – in Azkaban, just like —”

Sirius Black, thought Rick. Snape may have failed to penetrate his mind, but Rick had no trouble reading Snape’s. He understood now, why the Potions master hated him, but there was really nothing he could do about it.

“Let me see,” said Snape, having stopped himself before saying Black’s name once more. “Now where were we? Ah yes. I was deciding how many house points to deduct from Gryffindor for your riotous behaviour.”

“House points from Gryffindor?” demanded a sharp voice from behind him. “And why Severus, would you be deducting points from Gryffindor?” asked a very stern looking Professor McGonagall.

“Because, Professor McGonagall, Mr. Godfry has been causing a riot,” said Snape, glaring back at her.

“Well, from what I could see, Mr. Godfry was not the one who was rioting, it was the witches,” said Professor McGonagall. “And I couldn’t help but notice that the ones flinging curses and behaving the most unscrupulously, in their attempts to get to Mr. Godfry, were all Slytherin witches. If you are determined to be a wet rag and put a damper on the festive spirits by deducting house points, then may I suggest that you start with your own house.”

“Why that’s preposterous!” spat Snape. “Mr. Godfry was the one causing all the trouble; he needs to be dealt with. Someone needs to take this arrogant, conceited upstart in hand and —”

“Oh, for heavens sake! Lighten up Severus! It’s Christmas – get into the festive spirit of the season,” said Professor McGonagall. Then smiling at him, she said, “In any case, I was fully intending to take Mr. Godfry in hand....” She then turned to Rick and said, “Mr. Godfry, would you do this old witch the honour of dancing with her?”

Snape’s jaw dropped, his mouth momentarily, wide open, before he snapped it shut, grinding his teeth together. His face turned red and his knuckles white, as he balled his fists, struggling to keep control of his fury.

“The honour is all mine, Professor McGonagall,” said Rick gallantly.

Then Rick had a truly wicked idea – and once it got hold of him, he just couldn’t let it go. He suddenly remembered all those fanfics written by girls who seemed to be utterly infatuated with the dark persona of Severus Snape. He could never quite understand it. He hadn’t read many, but there were certainly a lot of them. He had also understood that Snape’s hatred of Sirius Black and now himself, was the result of envy. It was jealousy at their popularity in contrast to his own loneliness. He had wanted to be loved, but instead, he was spurned by the witches in his youth. Maybe....

Emboldened by the proximity of Professor McGonagall, Rick said. “Excuse me, Professor Snape, but honestly, I did nothing at all to cause all the pandemonium, and I don’t enjoy being mobbed like that. But there is a way you could help sir, to restore order.”

“What are you talking about Godfry?!” barked Snape menacingly.

“Well, if the witches had another wizard to dance with – one whom they secretly fancied, then it would take the pressure off me, and things might quieten down.”

“And how exactly did you imagine that I might help, Godfry? Perhaps you would like me to fetch that insufferable popinjay, Gilderoy Lockhart, from St. Mungo’s for the evening?” said Snape, sarcastically.

“Why no sir,” said Rick. “I was meaning that you should dance with the witches. You’d be surprised how many of them have secret crushes on you, sir. I think it’s the authority figure thing, sir. It seems to appeal to submissive temperaments. I think you might find after the first dance, that you’ll have quite a mob waiting to ask you for the next dance. You might even need to fight them off with your wand, sir.”

“Don’t push me, Godfry,” snarled Snape in fury, his wand-hand itching to hex this clone of his hated nemesis Black, into some lowly life-form, like a slug, or amoeba. But, in spite of himself, he wondered if perhaps there wasn’t some truth to Godfry’s words. It might be rather pleasant to spend the evening dancing with a lot of adoring witches. No! It’s just a trick of Godfry’s to try to humiliate me! It’s exactly the sort of thing that Black and Potter used to do. They were always trying to make a fool of me in front of the whole school. No, I’m too wise to fall into those traps again, he thought to himself.

Professor McGonagall, meanwhile, had whisked Rick off to dance, leaving Severus Snape musing alone. His thoughts were interrupted by Luna Lovegood.

“Excuse me, Professor Snape, but would you care to dance with me?” she asked, looking up at him dreamily.

Snape was momentarily transfixed by indecision. “Get out of my way!” he finally growled, and without a further word, gathered his cloak about him and swept out of the hall, determined to take his vengeance upon the Rose Garden and any couples unfortunate enough to be caught snogging there.

Professor McGonagall, meanwhile, was in very lively spirits. She was still chuckling over what Rick had said to Severus Snape. It was probably quite true, but she doubted very much that Severus would ever oblige his admirers. After all, he had a formidable reputation to uphold – as The Potions master from Hell.

“You dance divinely, Mr. Godfry,” Professor McGonagall said after their second dance. “I seem to have intimidated your fan club. None of them seem very eager to cut in on me.... Ah, but I spoke too soon,” she added.

“Minerva, come, come now, you mustn’t monopolise the handsome Mr. Godfry,” said Professor Sprout, taking Rick by the arm. “I believe it’s my turn,” she said, leading Rick away. By the time the supper break came, Rick had also danced with Madams Hooch and Pomfrey, and Professors Sinistra, Vector and Tonks. Tonks was by far the most fun, but Rick was thankful when the band finally stopped after two hours of continuous playing – and continuous dancing for him – he was exhausted.

Hermione was not in a good mood when he eased himself into the seat beside her. “Well, Rick, I hope you’ve been having a wonderful time dancing tonight. God knows I have,” she said icily.

Rick tried to put his arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged it away angrily. “Honestly Rick, I don’t know why I allowed myself be persuaded to invite you – I’ve had exactly one dance with you the whole night!” she fumed.

“I’m really sorry Hermione, but there was nothing I could do – I just couldn’t get away. I kept trying to get back to you after every dance, but witches kept asking me to dance. I swear that I’ll never go to another Witches’ Prerogative ball,” sighed Rick.

“And what’s wrong with a Witches’ Prerogative?” bristled Hermione. “That’s a typical male chauvinist attitude – blaming it on the witches – just because they’re in a position of power for once!”

“Hermione, I’m not blaming anyone. I’m just trying to tell you that I wanted to come back to you, but I couldn’t. I mean what could I do?”

“You could have said no,” said Hermione evenly. “You could have refused to dance.”

“You don’t know how hard that would have been for me,” whispered Rick imploringly in her ear. “They were all so ... I don’t know, eager and hopeful. I mean, it was their one big chance to make contact. It would have really hurt them, if I’d refused. I just couldn’t say no – it would’ve hurt me.”

“So you hurt me instead,” said Hermione bitterly. She understood why Rick couldn’t refuse. It was because of the empathy he felt with everyone. It was one of the things that she loved about him, but sometimes it had very annoying consequences. “You could have at least refused to dance with that horrible Pansy Parkinson. I mean after what she did – abducting me and delivering me to Draco Malfoy to ... to —”

“Hermione, let’s not go there, please?” implored Rick. “I know what she did was terrible, and I’m sure she’s done lots of other bad things. But I can’t hate her. I ask myself what I’d be like, if I’d been born in a Death Eater family and brought up with all their hatreds and prejudices. Just imagine growing up in that kind of environment. Then, when you turn eleven, you come to Hogwarts and get sorted into Slytherin, where lots of your housemates are also the children of Death Eaters, who have all been indoctrinated, since they were little, with that racist Pureblood ideology and all their other warped values. I really feel sorry for Draco and Pansy and the other Slytherins from Death Eater families. Most of them never had a chance. In fact, the only chance they have is if we treat them like human beings, rather than just shut our hearts and minds to them, as if they were irredeemable monsters.”

“You’re right,” sighed Hermione. “I know what you’re saying is true, Rick. But it’s incredibly difficult not to hate them – especially Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson, after what they tried to do to me. But I’ll try. I just wish I had your generosity of spirit.”

Hermione put her hand on Rick's arm. "Let's forget about all of that for now, and try to enjoy what's left of the evening. I'm sorry I got angry with you before. I know it's not your fault – you were just the wrong wizard in the wrong place at the wrong time. But I feel much better now that I've vented my frustration," she said, finally smiling at him.

"Just call me Mr. Wrong," laughed Rick. "Hey guys," said Rick, raising his voice so that the others at the table could hear him. "You just have to hear what happened earlier, when Snape came up and accused me of starting a riot." Rick amused them, describing his encounter with Snape and his timely rescue by Professor McGonagall. The image of Rick being whisked away from under the Potions master's hooked nose to dance with Professor McGonagall had them in hysterics.

Rick recounted how he had suggested that Snape help him out by dancing with some of the witches, because lots of them secretly fancied him. Most of the boys broke up at this, thinking it was hilarious. Ron almost gagged on the Black Forest cake he had just stuffed into his mouth. Hermione felt ill at the thought of dancing with their Potions master. But she noticed that Lavender and Parvati were blushing guiltily. Goodness, thought Hermione, maybe Rick is right about the submissive ones crushing on Snape – who would have thought it? All that greasy hair and those yellow teeth ... yuck, it made her feel sick.

"Hermione," said Rick, "I've just thought of a plan that will allow us to dance undisturbed after supper."

"And what makes you think I want to dance with you?" asked Hermione coyly. "I hope you're not trying to usurp my Witches' Prerogative, yet again, by suggesting that I ask you to dance."

"Why no, not at all," said Rick in feigned innocence. "I was merely indicating that if you did happen to want to dance with me, and, you were the first one to ask me after the break, that I might be able to stop the other witches from cutting in on you."

“Sounds interesting,” said Hermione. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“You’ll have to ask me to dance – and be the first one – if you want to find out. Otherwise you’ll never know,” said Rick, with a big grin. Then looking up, his grin vanished as he noticed Lisa Turpin approaching fast, with several other witches in hot pursuit.

“Hermione, umm, I don’t want to rush you or anything, but in five seconds this discussion is going to become purely academic.”

Hermione looked up and spotted Lisa coming towards Rick and said quickly, “Any chance of another dance, Mr. Godfry?”

“There sure is,” said Rick relieved, as he stood to lead Hermione to the dance floor. It was a nice slow number, and Rick pulled Hermione close to him, wrapping his arms around her waist. Hermione, who was only a little shorter than Rick, put her arms around his neck and snuggled up to him. It felt so good; she was lost in the feelings which flowed from him, when they were physically close like this. It wasn’t until the fourth dance that she thought to ask Rick what he had done, because no one had tried to cut in on her this time.

“It’s my Wizard Repelling Charm,” said Rick. “It’s just like a Muggle Repelling Charm, except it works on witches and wizards. I cast it around the two of us. If I had just cast it around myself, then you wouldn’t be noticing me, and that would never do.”

“No, it certainly wouldn’t,” agreed Hermione. “It wouldn’t be any fun at all,” she said, resting her head dreamily on Rick’s shoulder.

“You know, I could kiss you,” said Rick, “and no one would even notice.”

“I’d notice,” giggled Hermione.

“Well, I certainly hope you would,” said Rick. “Come on, let’s give it a try. Err ... purely in the interests of science, you understand. This is

the perfect environment for assessing the effectiveness of the Wizard Repelling Charm, wouldn't you say?" asked Rick hopefully.

"Purely in the interests of science," answered Hermione. That was the last thing she said for a very long time. When their kiss ended, the music had stopped and the dance was over.

"That's some charm, that Wizard Repelling Charm, of yours," purred Hermione happily. "Although, I think, in light of how it has been deployed, and the fact that this is a Witches' Prerogative, it should be renamed the Witch Repelling Charm, for this evening."

"I couldn't agree more," said Rick cheerfully, lifting the charm as they walked back to their table to join their friends, who were getting ready to leave.

"Where have you two been?" asked Ginny. "No one has seen either of you since supper."

"Rick's been using some kind of Disillusionment Charm to stop witches cutting in on us – it worked brilliantly," said Hermione happily. "I've had him all to myself since supper."

"I wish I knew how to do one," said a very frustrated Ginny Weasley. "The few times I managed to get a dance with Harry, one witch or another would cut in as soon as it was over; and then it was impossible to get through the mob to ask him for another dance. I was furious – I was ready to start hurling hexes! It was terrible."

"You can say that again," added Harry as they left the hall. "I'm not all that fond of dancing, and I just couldn't get off the dance floor and back to our table. It seemed like all the witches had decided it was open season on Harry Potter tonight," he sighed.

"You can't really blame them," said Hermione wisely. "Most of them will never get another chance to talk to you or make contact. They'll probably all be telling their children and grandchildren one day about the night of the Hogwarts Yule Ball of 1996, when they danced with the famous Harry Potter."

“Yeah, come on Harry, just think how happy you’ve made so many witches ... get with the spirit of the season,” said Rick, smiling at him and clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, I guess you’re right,” said Harry, “but I was sure feeling like Scrooge at the time. I was desperate to get away from them. In the end, Ginny and I had to hide out in the Rose Garden.”

“What?” demanded Ron, in a rather unfriendly tone. “And what exactly were you doing in the Rose Garden with my little sister?”

“How dare you, Ronald Weasley!” said Ginny, bristling. “I’m not your little baby sister any more, and I’ll do exactly as I please. I’ll go to the Rose Garden or wherever I please, with whomever I please – and do whatever I please! It’s absolutely none of your business!”

“Hey, relax Ron,” said Harry. “Ginny’s virtue was safer out there in the Rose Garden than in a convent full of nuns. You should have seen the way Mother Superior Snape was prowling about, blasting rose bushes apart – the sadistic slimeball. He was deducting house points like there was no tomorrow – he even took points from Slytherin. It was five points just for holding hands!”

“It was so funny,” giggled Ginny. “He caught Blaise Zabini and Pansy Parkinson in a very compromising situation. He deducted fifteen points each, from Slytherin.”

“But didn’t Parkinson go to the ball with Malfoy?” asked Ron, puzzled.

“Yeah, she did. In fact, Snape caught her with Malfoy a little later, and deducted more points,” laughed Ginny. “Pansy Parkinson has quite a reputation, you know. I think she may have read a meaning into Witches’ Prerogative that Professor Dumbledore hadn’t fully intended,” she added, giggling.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 14 - Voldemort Plays Santa

The Hogwarts Express chugged its way through the wintry, snow-covered countryside. Rick was sitting next to Hermione in a compartment with Harry and Ron.

Thanks to Rick's Wizard Repelling Charm, no one had noticed Rick and Hermione dancing together after supper at the Yule Ball the previous night. Although they had gone to the ball together, and although all sorts of rumours regarding Rick were rife, pairing him with Hermione – amongst others (including Tonks), no one but Rick and Hermione knew of their relationship – and they intended to keep it that way.

Harry and Ron were absorbed in a magical parchment they had created, which allowed them to simulate complex Quidditch moves. They were working on some new strategies for their next match, which would be against Ravenclaw.

Rick surreptitiously slid his hand under Hermione's thick woollen cloak and took her hand in his. They had been quietly comparing notes on their Empathetic Magic experiment. Since the evening in the Room of Requirement, Hermione had tried summoning Rick thirty-five times. Rick had detected every one of them, and accurately identified the time and the location from which she had summoned him.

"A perfect score," whispered Hermione, impressed, squeezing Rick's hand. "Do you think it depends upon proximity?" she asked softly.

"I'm not sure," Rick whispered back. "Probably not. I know – let's try it over the holidays, while you're at home with your parents and I'm at the Burrow. We may as well use our separation for something useful," sighed Rick, sadly. Neither of them was looking forward to being apart.

When they reached King's Cross station, Rick and Hermione waited until Harry and Ron had left the compartment before embracing and sharing a goodbye kiss. The magical bond between them had

become surprisingly strong and they were both finding it very difficult and painful to part – even for such a short time.

Rick joined Harry, Ron and Ginny on the platform as Hermione exited to find her parents. Mad-Eye Moody, replete in bowler hat, pulled rakishly over his magical eye was there to meet them, along with Fred and George. A tall, slender dark-haired witch, by the name of Griselda, was the fourth member of the protection squad.

Moody ushered them into what looked like an ordinary London cab, complete with cabbie – obviously another member of the Order. Inside it was very spacious and Mad-Eye assured them that it was heavily warded, making it virtually impregnable to both physical and magical attacks.

Rick found himself sitting opposite Mad-Eye for the short journey to Diagon Alley, where they would have a chance to do their Christmas shopping, before flooing to the Burrow. Rick did not enjoy Mad-Eye's inquisitive questions or suspicious looks. A quick tour of his mind revealed that Mad-Eye – paranoid to a fault – was not about to trust Rick on anyone else's say so – not even Dumbledore's. 'Guilty until proven innocent', seemed to be Mad-Eye's motto, thought Rick.

Their shopping spree in Diagon Alley was not much of a spree. They moved together in an escorted group, which limited the number of shops they could visit. Rick made most of his purchases in Flourish and Blotts. It was easy to know if a book would be suitable for someone when you could speed read it first.

Rick bought 'The Greatest Grand Masters of Wizard Chess' for Ron; 'Potent Spells for Powerful Wizards' for Harry; 'A Theoretical Appreciation of the Animagus Transformation' for Hermione; 'Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Enchanting the Wizard of your Dreams but Were Too Afraid to Ask Your Mother' for Ginny; 'Muggle Machines – Doing Things the Hard Way' for Mr. Weasley; 'Gilderoy Lockhart – a Self Appreciation' by Gilderoy Lockhart for Mrs. Weasley; and a year's subscription to PlayWizard for Fred and George.

Ginny was not very happy at having her shopping time curtailed after less than a hour, when Mad-Eye Moody shepherded them up a small side-alley and then through a series of narrow alleyways until they arrived at what appeared to be a dead-end. Mad-Eye stationed himself at the entrance to the alleyway while Griselda beat out a rhythmic tattoo with her wand on the brickwork, causing a small green door to appear. She ushered them through the door and into a dark empty room, with a fireplace in one corner.

Griselda took a strange-looking golden-coloured device from her cloak. It looked a little like a double pocket watch – except that the twin dials had far too many hands, and in place of the usual numbers, were strange hieroglyphics. “I’m opening up a secure floo connection to the Burrow,” she explained to the curious students, as she manipulated the hands on the left dial. “For security reasons, the Burrow has been disconnected from the floo network. When they get my signal, they’ll open the connection at their end and you’ll be able to go.”

The hands on the right dial suddenly began dancing about. “Right!” said Griselda, throwing some floo powder into the fireplace, which flared up with green flames. “Off you go, and be quick about it. Just jump into the fireplace. There’s no need to say anything, this is a dedicated connection.”

Ginny jumped in first, and immediately disappeared. Ron and Harry followed her. Finally it was Rick’s turn. The twins, who had their own digs somewhere off Diagon Alley, remained behind with Griselda and Mad-Eye.

Rick didn’t enjoy his first experience of flooing. I’d rather Apparate, any day, he thought to himself. He came stumbling out of the Weasley’s fireplace, struggling to keep his feet, just as Mrs. Weasley was releasing Harry from a fond embrace. Rick felt a little awkward, but Mrs. Weasley welcomed him warmly and proceeded to dust him off in a motherly fashion, as if he were just one more of her own brood.

Rick loved the Burrow. It was a homely, higgledy-piggledy triumph of magic over gravity and the laws of physics. Mrs. Weasley took to Rick immediately (without any deliberate charm offensive on his part). With her nest depleted – only Ron and Ginny lived at home now – she was more than happy to have another young wizard to brood over, and Rick found himself enjoying being mothered. Rick was sleeping in Percy's old room. Harry, as usual, had been squeezed in with Ron.

"Hey, Rick, have you ever played wizard chess?" asked Ron, when they were sitting in the kitchen, drinking hot chocolate. Rick shook his head. Ron decided that it was time to initiate Rick into the cerebral pleasures of his favourite game. Ron won the first few games, but he became rather alarmed at the way that Rick was improving with every game. Rick managed to win the fifth game. He suspected that one (or more) of his benefactors from the spirit realm must have been a grand master of the game.

Ron was a brilliant player, but Rick was very soon more than a match for him – without cheating (it would have been easy for him to read Ron's mind to discover his intended game plan). Rick would have won most of the time, had he really tried; however, he decided it wasn't worth risking his tentative friendship with Ron. So they ended up winning about the same number of games.

"How the hell did you manage to pick it up so fast, mate?" asked Ron, in astonishment. "I've never seen anyone learn this game so fast! It's a bit of a new experience for me – losing at wizard chess."

"Err, sorry, Ron," said Rick apologetically.

"S'OK," said Ron. "It's good to have some serious competition for once. I haven't had to play this hard since my first year at Hogwarts, when I had to beat a giant chess set that McGonagall had enchanted to protect the Sorcerer's Stone. But my game hasn't improved much in the last few years, to be honest. I kind of ran out of serious competition – until now, that is!"

"Well, I think your game's been improving," said Rick. "It's only because mine's been improving too, that I'm able to keep winning my fair share of games."

“You know, you’re one of the few wizard chess players I know, who doesn’t mind talking about their strategies and explaining them. That’s really helping me a lot. I suppose you noticed that I’ve been using some of your own strategies against you. The thing that really flaws me, though, is the number of moves you can think ahead – it seems almost limitless.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ve got a good memory,” said Rick modestly. In fact, he had a perfect memory. He figured it probably came from Rowena Ravenclaw, along with her gift of speed reading. It gave him a huge advantage at wizard chess.

Rick explained to Ron and Ginny at the start of the holiday that Professor Dumbledore had asked him to give Harry some private one-on-one training in duelling. Rick was worried that they might feel left out and resentful. But in fact, they both realised that Harry’s talent and power exceeded their own, and if they joined in, they would be slowing him down. They understood that Harry needed all the help he could get, and neither wanted to hold him back.

Rick found himself having to analyse the process by which he became aware of the spells he used. They just seemed to appear in his mind when he needed them. He remembered the time in Defence Against the Dark Arts, when Draco was about to fling the Furnunculus Curse at Hermione. He needed something to stop it, and somehow the knowledge that he could cast a spell which would send the curse rebounding back to its caster, suddenly appeared in his mind.

He could identify the incantation associated with a spell if he wanted to, but in fact, he didn’t seem to need to say it, or even know it. He just had to concentrate on achieving the effect of the spell, and it was cast. Rick was fascinated by the way magic worked. Through his vast – and fast – reading, and his own contemplation, he had concluded that both the incantation and the use of a wand were merely aids. He reasoned that the fact that witches and wizards had uttered a certain incantation, century after century, in order to cast a certain spell, imbued the incantation with a certain energy, which was why correct

pronunciation was important. It also gave the caster confidence, that the spell, correctly performed, would work – because it had worked before, when performed in the same way. But since Rick lacked neither magical energy nor confidence in his magical ability, the incantation seemed unnecessary.

The function of the wand, he concluded, was to focus and magnify the magical energy of the witch or wizard. That was why Mr. Ollivander's art of matching the wand to the witch or wizard was so important. It had to resonate with each individual's magical energy. Rick knew that both Professor Dumbledore and Voldemort could do wandless magic. They both have such extraordinary magical power, that they can perform magic without needing a wand to magnify it, thought Rick, and it's exactly the same for me. That's why I can do wandless magic.

Harry was also a very powerful wizard, and Rick decided to find out if he, too, was capable of wandless magic. He explained his theory about wandless magic to Harry. "Well I've certainly done some unintentional wandless magic," said Harry, with a grin. "Like blowing up my awful Aunt Marge – so I know I can do it. I just hope I don't need to get that angry, to make it work for me."

They decided to go back to basics and started with Wingardium Leviosa. It took quite a bit of effort, but Harry eventually mastered it, without his wand. This gave him the confidence to progress to more difficult spells. They went on to Banishing and Summoning Charms. Harry was soon able to do these without his wand as well, although not with the same power as when he was using it. He even managed the Immobilising Curses Impedimenta and Immobulus with some success.

Rick was also teaching Harry some of the unusual spells that he had discovered. Harry was a serious and focused student. He treated these practice sessions with Rick as if his life depended upon it – and indeed it might, some day. After a lot of effort, he mastered the Virga Evanesco spell, which made an opponent's wand simply disappear. They got through several of Fred and George's fake wands in their practice. It was an excellent defensive spell. An opponent without a wand was virtually useless.

They spent a whole session working on the *Somes Leviosa* charm, which causes the caster to fly up in air. It was very useful in duelling. The tricky part was coming down where you wanted to – and, slowing down before you hit the ground. The first couple of times Rick had to help Harry avoid a crash landing. However, after a lot of practice, Harry became really good at it, and was even able to cast spells ‘in flight’. The pair of them had a lot fun flinging themselves about in mock duels. Rick taught Harry the *Lumos Prorsus* spell, which shoots a straight beam of light out from the end of the wand. This allowed them to ‘curse’ each other harmlessly, using the spell for target practice. With his athletic agility and Seeker’s reflexes Harry was more than a match for Rick in their mock battles.

Rick also taught Harry the Reflecting Shield, which he had used so successfully to protect Hermione from Draco’s *Furnunculus* curse, and later against the morning attack by Draco and his gang. This was a tricky one to practice. Rick had to put a Deflecting Shield up, around himself, for protection from his own curses which came flying back at him, as Harry mastered the Reflecting Shield.

Harry was really enjoying these training sessions with Rick. But more than that, he was gaining confidence. It seemed to him that his magical power was growing stronger – and he was right. Rick noticed it as well, although it wasn’t something that he’d deliberately done – because he didn’t know how to do it. Rick thought it must be the great witches and wizards of the Light, to whom he was connected. Perhaps they were using him as a conduit to transfer power to Harry.

“Harry, I think we should keep all of this a secret,” said Rick. “Your ability to do wandless magic – and the other spells – particularly the Reflecting Shield – could be a real bonus for you in a tight situation – especially if your opponents aren’t expecting it. It’s OK if Ron and Hermione – and Professor Dumbledore – know. In fact, it would probably be best if they did, but I wouldn’t let it get any further.”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry, “you’re probably right – the element of surprise, and all that.” Harry was silent for a few moments. There was something that had been increasingly troubling him. Finally he said, “You know, Rick, I really don’t buy your story about how you learned

all these unusual spells from this mysterious teacher of yours in New Zealand.”

“Err, why not?” asked Rick.

“Well, for one thing,” replied Harry, “I’ve read lots of books on spells – especially combat spells. None of these spells of yours – like the Reflecting Shield – are in any of them. And also, these are really difficult spells; you need a lot of magical energy to perform them – it’s not just a matter of knowing how to cast the spells and doing them correctly, you need to use a lot of power or they won’t work.

“Umm, well, yeah, you’re right, Harry. But you do have the power. That’s why Professor Dumbledore asked me to teach you, and why I didn’t want Ron and Ginny joining us.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have nearly as much power as you Rick. I mean, you’re probably even more powerful than Dumbledore – and Voldemort. Where did you get all that amazing power? And where did you get all these spells? It wasn’t really from some mysterious teacher, now was it?”

“OK,” sighed Rick. “No, it wasn’t from some mysterious teacher. But, I can’t tell you the source of my power and the spells. I’m sorry, Harry, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” asked Harry, becoming annoyed and frustrated at Rick’s unrelenting secrecy.

“Professor Dumbledore told me not to tell anyone. He said that, strategically, it’s an advantage if our enemies don’t know,” explained Rick. “It’s the same as you keeping your ability for wandless magic – and the other spells – secret. The best way to keep things a secret from our enemies is not to tell anyone – not even people on our side. People can be captured and tortured, put under a spell, given a truth potion or simply be tricked. But what they don’t know, they can’t divulge.”

“Yeah, I guess Dumbledore’s right,” agreed Harry, grudgingly. “It does make sense. But, Rick, if you’ve got so much power, why can’t

you just go after Voldemort and kill him? I remember one time, you said you didn't think you could kill him – but how can that be? You're so powerful. Why can't you just kill the evil monster? Then this whole awful nightmare would be over."

"I can't explain it to you Harry," said Rick, apologetically. "I don't actually understand it all that well myself. But I am certain, now, that I can't kill him. It's nothing to do with the Prophecy – it's because of something about me. But Professor Dumbledore seems to believe in the Prophecy. If he believes you're the one who's going to have to kill Voldemort, then it's probably true. He knows so much more than any of us."

"Yeah," sighed Harry. "And he keeps it all secret. He only tells you what he wants you to know. I'm sure there are still lots of things about my destiny he's hiding from me. So is he the only one who really knows all about you then?" asked Harry.

"Err, yeah, Dumbledore knows everything ..." replied Rick, evasively.

"And Hermione, maybe?" suggested Harry with a knowing grin.

"That witch has the instincts of a bloodhound," sighed Rick. "You have no idea how she kept at me. She's even got a Rick Godfrey dossier, where she's been recording everything about me. In the end, I caved in. It was just too hard to hide stuff from her. It wasn't a question of if – only of when she would finally uncover the truth."

"Don't worry," laughed Harry. "I know exactly what Hermione's like. She has to know everything, and once she sets her mind on finding something out, she doesn't give up – she's a bloodhound alright – and a damn good one too! But it's more than that, isn't Rick? There's something going on between the two of you, isn't there?"

"Err ... yeah," conceded Rick, nervously. "But it's meant to be ... err, a secret. For one thing, we weren't too sure how you and Ron would take it. Err ... does it bother you, Harry?"

"No, I'm OK with it, I think. I guess Hermione is more like a sister to me than anything else. I really care about her an awful lot, you know.

Maybe even more than a lot of brothers care about their sisters. Just make sure that Hermione doesn't get hurt, Rick – that's all – otherwise, you'll have both me and Ron to answer to."

"Thanks for the warning, mate," said Rick, nervously. "I think I'd already figured that one out. It's just lucky for me that Ron's developed an interest in Padma."

"Yeah, Ron sure fancies her, alright," said Harry. "Not that he'd admit it. Have you noticed how distracted he gets when she's around? I'm just glad she's not on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. Ron wouldn't even notice the Quaffle if Padma were flying around in front of him. We'd be slaughtered," laughed Harry.

"Yeah, I noticed," said Rick, grinning. "You'd have to be blind not to. But nothing's going to happen there unless Padma takes the initiative. Ron is the most clueless git in the world when it comes to girls. He's terrified of making the first move, in case he's rejected. Not that he would be. It's obvious Padma likes him. I mean she couldn't have made it any more obvious – inviting him to the ball and all."

"Right," agreed Harry. "They were together the whole evening. Padma kept asking him to dance, and Ron didn't refuse – not once. Funny, that – and I thought he hated dancing. Looks like he changed his mind," smirked Harry.

"Err, Harry," said Rick tentatively, "I couldn't help noticing that you seemed pretty, err ... interested in Ginny, that night at the ball. You like her, don't you?"

"Don't even go there, Rick!" said Harry, harshly, his good humour vanishing. "I don't like girls – any girls – do you understand? For me, to like a girl, is to hand her a death warrant. The only kiss I have to offer is the kiss of death. If Voldemort suspected that I liked someone, she'd immediately become a target. So, no, I do not like Ginny ... I ... can't."

Christmas morning arrived at the Burrow and they were joined by Fred and George for the traditional feast and fun. Percy, of course, was persona non grata, and wouldn't dare show his face at the Burrow. The two older Weasleys, Bill and Charlie were not coming home this year, so it was just the eight of them.

After they had opened their presents, Fred and George entertained them with some of their new inventions. "And here is the latest and greatest addition to our popular line of Culinary Magical Confectionary," announced George, as they sat around a large table.

"The healthy alternative," boasted Fred, "for the magical children –"

"– of the health conscious witch and wizard, our Fabulous Fruity Frogs," finished George. "What do you say Fred, shall we give young Rick here, the great good fortune to sample our latest flavours?"

"Christmas cometh but once a year, George, my heart overfloweth with good tidings to all men. Yes, agreed, let's allow him the incredible privilege of an exclusive pre-release tasting. Now, Rick, my boy, we do hope that you appreciate how amazingly fortunate you are. This," said Fred, removing a small orange coloured frog from his robes, and placing it on the table, "is our new Tangelo Toad."

"And this," added George, placing a bright yellow frog next to it on the table, "is our Banana Newt." Rick looked at the two frogs in amusement, as they hopped about the table. He guessed that Fred and George were hoping that, as a newcomer to Hogwarts, he was ignorant of their prodigious reputation as practical jokers. A quick glance at Fred's mind, however, was enough to convince him, that he definitely didn't want to eat either of the frogs.

"Err ... I'm not all that hungry," said Rick. "Yeah ... I think I'd better save my appetite for the delicious smelling Christmas dinner your mother's cooking up in the kitchen. Umm ... maybe someone else would like one ... Ginny? Ron? Harry? ... You're most welcome —"

But they all quickly shook their head and protested that they weren't the least bit hungry either. "You really know how to destroy a budding entrepreneur's confidence," said George feigning hurt and rejection.

“Yes,” added an equally depressed sounding Fred. “This rebuff, may be the fatal blow that consigns Weasley’ Wizarding Wheezes to the scrapheap of commercial history. And on Christmas Day and all,” he added, pretending to choke down a sob. Rick was so impressed with their performance that he decided to play along.

“Alright, alright, please don’t throw yourselves from the attic, guys. I’d never forgive myself. So, umm, which one should I try first, do you think?”

“The Tangelo Toad,” said Fred.

“No, no, eat my Banana Newt,” pleaded George.

“Tangelo Toad,” insisted Fred.

“Banana Newt,” begged George.

The twins started really hamming it up. They got down on their knees, with palms pressed together, beseeching Rick to try their frog first. With perfect aim and timing, Rick Banished the two frogs into their open mouths. They didn’t stand a chance. It looked as if the frogs had just up and jumped straight down their throats.

On the floor where the twins had been kneeling only moments before, there were now two very large toads: one orange and the other bright yellow. “Yiddup,” said the orange toad.

“Yiddup,” replied the yellow one. The four Hogwarts students were rolling around the floor in hysterics.

“I wonder how long those things last for?” laughed Ron, struggling to control himself. “They might have to eat mashed flies for Christmas Dinner, instead of roast turkey – what a crying shame!”

“Hey, let’s go out and have a snowball fight before the meal,” said Harry. Ginny had gone to help her mother, and Fred and George were hopping morosely around the lounge, so it was just Harry, Ron, and Rick for the snowball fight. But when they got outside, they

noticed something strange. There was a large bird flying back and forth just beyond the hedge at the end of the garden.

“It looks like a post owl,” said Ron. “But for some reason, it doesn’t seem to be able to fly beyond the Ward line. That’s strange, because post owls can normally cross it without a problem.” As they approached it, they saw that it wasn’t an owl, but a large, powerful black hawk. Attached to one of its legs was an envelope. With the cruel talons of its other leg, it gripped a large metal ring. As they climbed over the hedge, it approached them and dropped the envelope and the ring at Harry’s feet, before flying away.

“Don’t touch the ring!” warned Ron. “There must be something dangerous about it. That must be what was preventing the hawk from flying past the Ward line.”

Harry opened the envelope, which was addressed to him. As he silently read from the parchment, the blood drained from his face and his hands began trembling. Finally, he read aloud to his friends, in a shaking voice.

“Harry Potter,

I am holding Hermione Granger, captive.

Please accept the brass ring which accompanies this message, as a Christmas present from me. It is a Portkey, which will transport you to her. If you wish to see your friend again - alive, come immediately.

In case you are in any doubt as to the authenticity of my claim, you will find, affixed to the bottom of this message, a lock of her hair.

Come immediately – without delay! The next message will include one of her fingers; the next, one of her hands; followed by an arm, a leg ... and so on. The final letter, should you forsake your friend, will contain her heart.

Lord Voldemort.”

Harry dropped the parchment and made a lunge for the large brass ring, but before he could reach it, Rick had blasted it to pieces. Nothing remained, but a shallow depression in the ground, where it had been.

“Why the hell did you that?” yelled Harry, turning furiously upon Rick.

“To stop you walking straight into Voldemort’s trap!” replied Rick, steadily.

“And what about Hermione?” demanded Harry. “That lock of hair is hers, I know it! Voldemort’s got her, and he’s going to, to ... mutilate her, and then kill her; and you’ve just destroyed my only chance of saving her! I have to save her – can’t you understand. He took her because she’s my friend! He took her because of me! She’s going to die now – all because of me – and you’ve take away my only chance of saving her!”

“Harry,” said Rick, trying desperately to master the tumult of his own emotions. He felt like his heart was being crushed. “Are you really that stupid? I know you feel responsible for Hermione being taken, but use your brain! What did you think would be awaiting you at the Portkey destination? Hermione? No! Think again. Not Hermione – but Voldemort! Hermione is almost certainly being held somewhere else, far away from where the Portkey would have taken you. Taking that Portkey would have done nothing to save Hermione. It would have done nothing at all – but to have lost Harry Potter.”

“Rick’s right,” agreed Ron, struggling to control his emotions. “You won’t save Hermione by walking into Voldemort’s trap.”

“But we have to do something!” screamed Harry in desperation. “We have to find her and rescue her.”

“Harry,” said Rick. “I think I know how to find Hermione; and if it’s possible to rescue her, I have the best chance of succeeding. But I can’t do it, if I have to worry about you doing something stupid, like walking right into Voldemort’s trap. You are the one he’s really after. If he gets you, then the game is up. Voldemort will win and everyone on our side – not just Hermione – everyone, will perish. I’ll do absolutely

everything in my power to save Hermione. But you have to promise to stay here at the Burrow, or wherever Dumbledore wants you to go, and let me get on with finding Hermione. I need your promise, so that I don't have to worry about you. Will you give me a Wizard's Oath, Harry?"

"But how will you find her?" demanded Harry. "How will —"

"Harry, there's no time to explain. Please, just give me your oath."

"He's right Harry," said Ron urgently. There's no time to waste. I know you feel responsible for what's happened to Hermione, and that it's your responsibility to rescue her. But Rick's right. He has best chance of succeeding. There seems to be some kind of special link between Rick and Hermione. How else could he have found her in the dungeon with Malfoy that night? He's probably the only one who can find her, and he's probably the only one powerful enough to get her back. The only thing keeping Hermione alive right now, is you, Harry. Vol ... Voldemort wants you! Hermione is valuable to him only as long as you remain out of his reach. If you rush off and get yourself captured, then Hermione will be of no further use to him – she'll be dead. Please, Harry, for Hermione's sake, please promise!"

"Alright," sighed Harry, "I give you a Wizard's Oath that I'll stay here at the Burrow, or wherever Dumbledore says. Good luck," he added, shaking Rick's hand sombrely. "Just bring her back to us."

"Yeah, good luck, mate," said Ron, his voice filled with emotion, as he too shook Rick's hand. "Please bring her back to us – unharmed."

"I'll do everything possible, believe me," said Rick. "Contact Dumbledore immediately, tell him everything. Goodbye!"

Ron and Harry stared at empty space – Rick had simply vanished.

Rick Apparated to Hermione's house. He found her parents seated together on a couch, looking very worried. They gasped in surprise

when Rick materialised before them in their lounge room. “Who are you?” demanded Mr. Granger, recovering from the shock.

“I’m a friend of your daughter Hermione, from school.” said Rick.

“Do you know what’s happened to Hermione?” cried her mother. “We were opening our Christmas presents this morning. There was a small present wrapped in green paper, without a card under the Christmas tree. All that was written on it was Hermione. It looked like it might be a book. It was, I think. But when Hermione removed the wrapping paper and touched it, she just disappeared into thin air. We haven’t seen her since.”

“At first we thought it must have been some magical practical joke,” said her father. “Hermione often talks about the things Ron Weasley’s brothers get up to. But she’s been gone almost two hours, and she’d know how worried we’d be by now. We are becoming very concerned that whatever took her away from us was not some friendly prank, but something more sinister.”

“Err ... Mr. and Mrs. Granger, err....” Rick was about to tell them that Hermione had been taken captive, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell them the truth. It would fill them with dread and despair. There was absolutely nothing they could do to help her; it would be kinder not to tell them the truth.

“I, err ... I think I know where she might be. Please don’t worry; everything will be alright. Err ... try to stay calm. You will be hearing from Hermione soon – I’m sure of it,” said Rick, trying to sound reassuring. In fact, he wasn’t sure of anything at that moment. He knew Hermione’s parents would have lots of questions – questions that he couldn’t answer – or wouldn’t want to answer, so he took the easy way out – he Disapparated.

In the days leading up to Christmas, Rick and Hermione had continued their Empathetic Magic experiment, as planned, to see if it worked over long distances. It did. Rick had felt Hermione summon

him, several times a day. Not only that, but he could sense the direction from which the summons was coming.

In theory, by Apparating to various distant locations, he should eventually be able to get a fix on where she was. To his immense relief, Rick could sense Hermione summoning him. However, her summonses were sporadic – and worryingly, they were very, very weak. But, at least, he knew she was still alive.

During their experiments, Hermione's summonses had always been very clear. No matter what he was doing at the time, he had always sensed it, the moment she summoned him. But now, he had to concentrate extremely hard to catch a very occasional and very weak summons. That was why he hadn't been aware of her summonses after she'd been abducted by Voldemort's Portkey. She must have been summoning him from the moment of her capture. But why are her summonses so damn weak? he asked himself, fretfully. Rick didn't know, and he didn't want to think about it – it was too distressing.

Rick finally pinned Hermione's location down, to somewhere west of Arisaig. But Arisaig was on the west coast of the Scottish Highlands, which put Hermione's location somewhere out in the Atlantic Ocean – that didn't make any sense at all. Then, Hermione's summonses stopped completely. Rick was beside himself with worry and anxiety. He was also frozen to the bone. It was a bitterly cold Christmas Day in Arisaig. Rick decided to Apparate to Hogwarts.

Ron had already spoken with Professor Dumbledore through a secure floo connection from the Burrow, so he already knew what had happened to Hermione. He praised Rick for his quick thinking in destroying the Portkey. He agreed completely. It would have taken Harry to Voldemort – and his doom – not to Hermione.

The Headmaster conjured up some hot tea and crumpets to help Rick warm up. Then he listened attentively, while Rick explained about his Empathetic Magic link with Hermione, and how he had attempted to use it to find her. "She's being held somewhere west of Arisaig, but

there's nothing west of Arisaig – except the Atlantic Ocean. It doesn't make any sense. Do you have any idea where she could be, Professor?" asked Rick despondently.

"Azkaban," said Dumbledore with a sad sigh. "They must be holding Miss Granger at Azkaban. It's about thirty miles west of Arisaig. There are no longer any prisoners at Azkaban. Voldemort's forces took over the island, when the Dementors decided to throw in their lot with him. I had been expecting it for some time. He has a lot more to offer, by way of satisfying their abominable craving for human souls, than our side. The remaining Death Eaters, who had not escaped in the previous breakout, were released. Voldemort gave the other prisoners, criminals mostly, as gifts, to the Dementors – to feast upon their souls. They were then killed by Death Eaters, and their bodies disposed of."

"Voldemort has no use for a prison ... because he takes no prisoners. He is merely using Azkaban as a holding pen for his Dementors – until he's ready to deploy them in a full scale offensive. As far as we know, there are no Death Eaters – or anyone else on Azkaban – just Dementors. Several hundred of the foul creatures."

"Well, there's a prisoner there now – Hermione," said Rick.

"Yes," sighed Dumbledore, helplessly, shaking his head sadly from side-to-side. "It is no surprise that her summonses were so weak, and then finally stopped. She is the only one on the island. Her emotions are all that those loathsome Dementors have to feed upon. I am very surprised that she managed to keep summoning you for as long as she did."

"Yes, it's very lucky," said Rick. "Otherwise, I'd never have located her. I'll Apparate straight to Azkaban. I should be able to project a magical map once I get there – it won't be hard to find her. Then I'll Disapparate us both out ... easy."

"No," sighed Professor Dumbledore, sadly, shaking his head. "Unfortunately, it's not easy. It's true that you can Apparate in and out of Azkaban. It's also true that you are able to Apparate others with

you. But the Wards protecting Azkaban will prevent you Apparating Miss Granger out. Unlike you, she is not immune to Wards.”

“What if I could turn into a hippogriff or a winged horse, or something like that?” asked Rick. “Some of the witches and wizards whose powers I received must have been Animagi. I could fly Hermione out on my back.”

“You are correct,” replied Dumbledore. “There are many noted Animagi amongst them. However, before you go rushing off to Azkaban to rescue Miss Granger, there is something to which you are going to have to give very serious consideration,” said the Headmaster, in a very grave and serious tone.

“I appreciate that Miss Granger is in grave peril at this very moment; and that any attempt to rescue her must be immediate – time is not on her side. I also understand that there is a great bond of affection between the two of you. However, Rick, you also need to consider why you are here – in this world. You were sent here for a purpose. To help secure the victory of the Light over the forces of Evil. You have already had some notable successes here at Hogwarts. However, the battle is not yet won – far from it. To be perfectly honest, the odds are still heavily against us. You are our only hope of victory. If you were to perish in your attempt to rescue Miss Granger, our cause would almost certainly be lost.”

“But why would I perish?” asked Rick. “What do I have to fear from Azkaban?”

“Dementors,” replied the Headmaster. “For all your powers and magical abilities, I can think of nothing that will protect you from the terrible effects of Dementors. Rick, by now you must have understood the nature of your magical endowments. You are not omnipotent. You cannot do anything and everything you wish. Your magical abilities are limited to those of the great witches and wizards who chose to give you their powers. None of them had any magic that would have made them immune to the dreadful effects of Dementors. None of them had any magic which can defeat or destroy a Dementor.”

“If you go to Azkaban,” continued Dumbledore, “you will, I fear, be as badly affected by the Dementors as any other witch or wizard. Making yourself invisible will not help – the Dementors will sense your presence, and find you. Disillusionment Charms, Shields, none of them works against Dementors. The Patronus Charm is the only magic that works against them.”

“Surely I will be able to cast a powerful Patronus Charm,” said Rick.

“Yes, I am sure you will,” replied the Headmaster. “However, it is one thing to repel a handful of Dementors with a Patronus Charm. It is quite another, to hold off several hundred of them, attacking in unison – determined to suck out your soul. A Patronus, no matter how powerful, would not be able to keep that many Dementors at bay for very long. The Dementors are under orders, I imagine, not to suck out Miss Granger’s soul – yet. But anyone else, straying onto their island, would be fair game. As soon as they detect you, they will immediately come after you – to suck out your soul – make no mistake about it.”

“Do not underestimate the difficulties you would face, Rick,” said Dumbledore, gravely. “If you go to Azkaban, you will not only be putting your own life in grave danger, you will also be putting the very destiny of Wizardkind at great peril. I shall not try to tell you what you should do, it is a most difficult decision to make, but it is your decision. You must choose between love – and duty.”

Rick felt completely conflicted. He knew he was here in this world for a purpose – a great purpose. If he perished in Azkaban, the Dark would almost certainly triumph over the Light. All the hopes and hard work of the great witches and wizards of the Light, who had sent him here, would be lost. Thousands would die in this world. All the Squibs and Muggle-born witches and wizards would be tortured and exterminated. Voldemort would also unleash his Evil upon the Muggle world. How can I risk all that, for one person? Rick asked himself.

But try as he might, Rick could not leave Hermione to her fate in Azkaban. He just couldn’t do it. She was a part of him. He could not abandon her. He would rather die, than live without her. If it was only his life he was risking, the choice would be simple. But it was far more than his life at stake – and yet he knew, he would take the risk.

It was not a matter of weighing up the odds or of trading off the possible gains and losses in some mathematical equation. It was an emotional imperative – he simply could not abandon Hermione.

“Professor Dumbledore,” replied Rick, eventually. “I’m truly sorry to disappoint you, but I am going to attempt to rescue Hermione. I know it’s selfish to risk the lives of so many good people, for the life of just one – but I can’t help myself. That one life is precious to me, beyond all others – including my own. The bond of love between us is so strong, that I cannot think of myself as separate from Hermione. I cannot imagine living without her. I must try to save her. Please forgive me, sir, please try to understand....”

“I do understand,” sighed Dumbledore, in resignation. “I had very little doubt what your decision would be. But please, promise me one thing, Rick. If you find yourself being overwhelmed by the Dementors, you will Disapparate away from Azkaban immediately – even though it means leaving Miss Granger behind. You will have to judge it very carefully, because once they take hold of your mind – and your emotions, you will lose the power to act. Then it will be too late – and you will be lost; Miss Granger will be lost. We will all be lost.”

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

It's a bit of a cliffy here ... and, well ... while I wouldn't want to give the impression that I'm blackmailing anyone ... I wouldn't be at all surprised if the length of time till the next chapter is posted turns out to be inversely proportionate to the number of Reviews posted ... (not so subtle hint).

Anonymous Reviews are accepted.

Chapter 15 - The Prisoner of Azkaban

Lucius Malfoy Apparated into the cold wet cobblestone courtyard of Azkaban prison. It was enclosed by grimy grey cellblocks, built several stories high, on all four sides. It was horrible and desolate, like something out of a medieval nightmare. Lucius Malfoy? No, it wasn't really Lucius Malfoy; but it looked like him – exactly like him.

Rick had discovered some months ago, that, like Tonks, he was a Metamorphmagus. He'd practiced a bit, and found it was really easy to transform himself to look like anyone whose appearance was familiar to him – although he'd never seriously attempted to use this ability until now. He'd forgotten to ask Professor Dumbledore if Dementors had eyes and could actually see, but he didn't want to risk it. Plus, there was always the possibility of running into Death Eaters. Rick didn't want to be seen and possibly identified, so he decided to morph himself.

Lucius Malfoy seemed like a good choice. If he was recognised at Azkaban, it would simply serve to confuse Voldemort and his followers. They probably had no idea that Lucius Malfoy had been Squibbed. Narcissa Malfoy had hushed it all up, and was almost certainly the source of recent rumours to the effect that her husband had disappeared in dangerous circumstances, and was presumed dead. Having Lucius turn up at Azkaban to spirit away Voldemort's prize prisoner would have the Dark Side dumbfounded, and would likely send them on a wild goose chase. Then, there was always the possibility that Dementors could see. If they recognised him as Lucius Malfoy, they might leave him alone.

Rick immediately closed his eyes and projected a magical map of the prison. He had no difficulty spotting Hermione – hers was the only name visible. She was in a cell, one level up on the northern side of the courtyard. Rick was about to Apparate to her cell, when the wave of numbing coldness hit him. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced. His whole body shook uncontrollably, he was struggling to breathe. Either, the Dementors didn't recognise him as a high-ranking Death Eater, or, they just didn't care – a meal was a meal.

Looking around, Rick saw that he was completely encircled by Dementors. How had they got there so quickly? Could Dementors Apparate? The stench of rotting flesh was overpowering, and a hideous rattling noise came from all around him. Waves of coldness, of fear, and of helplessness surged through him. Rick struggled to keep his feet. Finally he fell, hard, on the filthy, freezing cobblestones.

“Mike! Mike! We’re going to crash!” screamed a woman’s voice – which seemed oddly familiar.

“I can’t control it! There’s black ice on the road! We’re sliding —” yelled a man’s voice – also, somehow familiar.

“We’re going to die!” screamed the woman. His mother – Rick was certain of it. She was screaming hysterically. Rick was gripped by the most terrible fear. He couldn’t see anything, but he could hear, and he could feel the motion of the car as it hurtled ... out of control, down the road. He was frozen with terror.

“My God!” screamed the man. “We’re going too fast! That safety rail won’t stop us – noooooo!!!” Rick was certain now – it was his father. There was a bang and a jolt. It felt like the car had left the road and launched off into space, before beginning its sickening downward plummet. All he could hear were screaming voices – his mother’s, his father’s ... and his own. He was witnessing the last harrowing moments of their lives.

Rick became aware of something dragging him up by the shoulders. He was assailed by an unbearable fetid stench. Forcing his eyes to open, he saw the huge Dementor. It held his shoulders in a vice-like grip; it was bringing his face up to meet its own. The Dementor had thrown back its hood. There was a terrible rasping, rattling noise coming from its mouth – if you could call that hideous hole in its face a mouth. Rick felt terribly weak. He had to struggle hard to remain conscious; it was too late now to Disapparate away. He felt so utterly miserable and bereft of happiness – there was no hope of casting a Patronus Charm – what could he do?

Suddenly, he remembered how Sirius Black had used his Animagus form to protect his mind from the terrible effects of the Dementors of

Azkaban. Closing his eyes, Rick tried to visualise the Animagus forms of his spiritual benefactors. But he couldn't concentrate. Something cold and slimy touched his lips – desperately, he tried to turn his head away from the nauseating creature. For a moment he succeeded, and managed to draw a breath of stinking air. Then he felt the slimy, scabby hands of the Dementor grabbing hold of his head, and pulling it back to its own fowl, putrid face.

Desperately, Rick tried to force his mouth shut – to seal his lips. He felt the cold, slimy 'mouth' of the Dementor, pressing hungrily against his lips again. Somehow it was forcing his mouth open. Merlin, help me, he thought to himself, desperately trying to conjure up an Animagus image in his mind. What's that? he asked himself, as he caught the image of something small and furry – A mouse! He willed himself to transform, to become the tiny brown mouse, which he saw in his mind.

The Dementor was about to begin its loathsome feast upon Rick's soul. But suddenly, it found it was empty-handed – and empty-mouthed. Its prey had unexpectedly vanished – or so it seemed. The Dementor didn't notice the tiny brown mouse, scurrying fearfully away, across the cobblestone courtyard. The frightened little mouse passed unobserved and un-sensed, through the vicious circle of Dementors, which had been surrounding it. The soul-numbing coldness and unutterable misery, caused by the Dementors, had all but vanished. The vile creatures seemed to hardly affect Rick in his mouse form.

It feels really weird being a mouse, thought Rick. He knew who and what he was – and what he was trying to do – but his senses and perceptions had completely changed. Everything looked entirely different – so huge – and the smells ... they were far more intense and far richer – but somehow they didn't seem unpleasant to his rodent senses. Rick's psyche and emotions, however, were still very much his own. And they were in turmoil, as he struggled to overcome the fear and shock from the traumatic experience of the hideous Dementor, which had almost sucked out his soul.

When he reached the corner stairway leading up to Hermione's cell, he realised he had a problem. The steps were immense for such a tiny animal – how was he going to get up them? Yes! He could jump

very well, he discovered. But still, it was hard work, and very tiring to leap up all the steps to get to the next level. When he finally got there, he was quite exhausted and had to stop to rest, before proceeding.

When he finally reached the door of Hermione's cell, he discovered, to his dismay that he couldn't get in. He had hoped there would be a gap under the door for him to squeeze through – but there was none. There was a small barred window, set in the door at head height. But he wasn't able to climb up the metal surface of the door to reach it; he couldn't get any traction at all with his tiny claws.

He needed to stop for a moment and think of a plan for getting Hermione out of Azkaban. Things weren't working out as well as he'd hoped. At least the Dementors hadn't followed him, nor had they come to check up on their prisoner. Obviously, they weren't bright enough to connect Rick's appearance with their prisoner, or think that it might be a rescue attempt. But the minute he turned back into his human form, they would sense him and be onto him again. Rick wondered if he could change from one Animagus form to another, without having to change back into his human form. Rick tried to visualise his potential Animagus forms again. Yes, even as a mouse, he could visualise them, so perhaps he could make a direct transformation.

His deliberations were interrupted by a loud scurrying sound. He looked around to find five very large, nasty grey rats stalking him. They looked hungrily at him with their beady black eyes – whiskers twitching in anticipation of a nice juicy meal. Rick's rodent instincts kicked in, and sent him scurrying away. He bolted down the corridor, only to find more of the horrible rats at the other end – he was trapped. The rats moved in for the kill. Just as they were about to pounce on the tiny mouse – to their great surprise – it vanished. In place of their quarry sat a large grey tabby cat – getting ready to pounce – on them! The rats didn't bother hanging around to investigate this mysterious transformation – they turned tail and fled. Rick breathed a sigh of relief – that was a close call – too close!

Rick padded back along the dark corridor to Hermione's cell. He liked the feeling of being a cat. He felt sleek and lithe – and powerful. There was no sign of the rats; it looked like they had disappeared.

The cat positioned itself a couple of feet back from Hermione's door. He leapt up to the window, wrapping his paws around the bars. But it was obvious that he was too big to get through them. Rick changed back into a mouse. Now, in his smaller form, he could easily get through the bars.

Looking down from his vantage point, Rick was able to make out the shape of someone lying huddled on a filthy mattress in one corner of the dark, dank, stinking cell. Rick jumped down from the barred window and changed back into a cat – just in case there were more rats around. Rick bounded over to Hermione. Her wrists were manacled and attached by long chains to the wall. She seemed to be unconscious. Rick rubbed himself up against her, purring loudly.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes – they were full of fear and anxiety. When she saw the cat, she gave a start, and sat up. The cat immediately jumped into her lap, continuing its contented purring. “Wherever did you come from?” she asked. She looked closely at the cat. It was very clean and in excellent condition. If there were any cats in Azkaban, she thought, they would be filthy, mangy creatures. There was something oddly familiar about this cat. Just having it sitting in her lap raised her spirits. It seemed to radiate a sense of warmth and calm ... and love

“Rick?” she whispered. “Is that you?” The cat nodded its head in a very human way. “I should have guessed that you’d be an Animagus,” said Hermione picking up the cat and hugging it to her chest as she sobbed.

“Oh, Rick, Rick, you heard me calling you, and you came! You have no idea how absolutely horrible it’s been. One moment, I was with my parents, happily opening presents under the Christmas tree and the next, I was imprisoned in this wretched cell. Then that horrible Bellatrix Lestrange came and took some of my hair. She said they were only keeping me alive so they could use my body parts to lure Harry to his doom – that once they had him, I’d be given to the Dementors to feast upon. She was laughing and cackling like a maniac – I’m sure she must be half crazy from her time here in Azkaban – who wouldn’t be?” she asked, shuddering. Hermione patted the cat while she talked; its presence gave her comfort.

"I've been feeling so miserable and desolate since I've been here. It was almost impossible to summon you. I found it so hard to think about you, because all my thoughts of you are happy ones. It must be the Dementors. My mind keeps going back to that dreadful dungeon and Malfoy, and all the fear and terror of that night. I just don't seem to be able to push it out of my mind. But I feel so much better now that you're here – you always seem to have that effect on me – even as a cat. Rick, how am I going to get out of this loathsome hell hole? We need to plan our escape, but how can we do it, if we can't talk? You have to change back to your human form to talk to me – Oh no! Don't do that! The Dementors will sense you and come after you!"

The cat squirmed out of Hermione's arms and suddenly changed into a brightly coloured lorikeet, which fluttered down and landed in Hermione's lap. Its chest was red, yellow, and purple and its back was bright green. Hermione gasped in surprise. She was even more surprised when it began talking to her.

"Is this better?" squawked the lorikeet.

"My!" said Hermione, somewhat stunned. "You can talk! Though it doesn't sound much like you, Rick, it sounds more like a ..."

"Parrot?" asked Rick. When he'd seen the form of a parrot in his mind, he was wondering if it might be magical, and able to talk properly, like a person, rather than a parrot. Fortunately, it could. "It's so good to see you Hermione, you have no idea how worried and distraught I've been since you disappeared. Your summonses were so weak – and then they stopped completely – I was so afraid, that ... I'd lost you. I'm just so relieved to find you alive."

"Rick, is Harry safe? Please tell me that he didn't rush off like an idiot to save me and fall into Voldemort's trap."

"He certainly tried. Voldemort knew exactly how to set him off. He sent a message with a lock of your hair and a Portkey, telling him you'd be killed if he didn't come."

"But he didn't go —" cried Hermione.

“He tried – but I blasted the Portkey to bits before he could grab it,” said Rick.

“Thank goodness,” said Hermione, with a sigh of relief. “Apart from remembering being in that dungeon with Malfoy, the other horrible images that kept preying on my mind have been of Harry, rushing off blindly to my rescue, and being captured by Voldemort. My mind has been full of the most gruesome images of Voldemort torturing Harry and killing him. I didn’t know if they were real or just some awful nightmares, caused by the Dementors. I couldn’t bear having Harry’s death on my conscience – it was all so awful!”

“Rick, I’m so relieved to know he’s safe, you have no idea,” said Hermione, gratefully. “But how are we going to get out of here? It’s not going to be easy, with all these Dementors.”

“I’m going to fly you out on my back,” said Rick

“Well it won’t work if you’re a lorikeet, that’s for sure,” said Hermione. “You’ve got other Animagus forms you can choose from, I imagine, apart from the cat and the lorikeet. Can you use any of the Animagus forms of the great witches and wizards who blessed you with their powers, then?” Before Rick could reply, Hermione continued. “So which one were you planning to use? I don’t like flying on Hippogriffs at all, and Thestrals aren’t much better.”

“Actually,” squawked Rick, finally managing to get a word in, “I was thinking of something with a little more firepower.” Hermione thought that the lorikeet seemed to be grinning – but then again, lorikeets always look like they’re grinning, so it was hard to tell.

“You’re not planning on turning into a dragon, are you Rick? Because there is no way I’m going to try holding onto the back of a dragon – while flying through the air – so you better come up with a better plan than that!” Hermione was finding arguing with a lorikeet a little bizarre. She knew it was really Rick – but it was still a lorikeet.

“But the dragon will be perfect, Hermione, just listen to my plan,” said Rick. “No matter which Animagus form I use, we have to get down to

the courtyard – it's the only place I can take off from. No matter which form I use, you're going to be on my back and the Dementors will attack you – before I can get away. But a dragon should be able to hold them off with its fire."

"That's all very well," said Hermione to the lorikeet, "but how exactly am I going to manage to hold onto a dragon?"

"I've never actually turned into my dragon Animagus before, but I can visualise it very distinctly in my mind. It looks like a Norwegian Ridgeback and it's got what looks to be a harness and riding saddle attached to its back. So if you jump up on my back, just before I transform, you should find yourself pretty much in the saddle. Just strap yourself in and hang on for the ride of your life!"

"I really don't like this idea," said Hermione, fretfully. "But I suppose it's our only option. You could just Apparate away, I suppose, I imagine that's how you got here. If you can get past the Hogwarts Wards, Azkaban wouldn't be a problem for you. You can't Apparate me past the Wards though – can you?" asked Hermione hopefully – desperate to avoid the prospect of becoming a dragon rider.

"Professor Dumbledore said it wasn't possible," replied Rick. "So it's the dragon, I'm afraid. Now here's the plan. The only magic I can do in my Animagus form is transform into something else. In order to get you safely down to the courtyard, I'm going to have to change back to my human form. I'll blast the door, and we'll make a run for it."

"But what about the Dementors? They'll be on to us as soon as you transform," said Hermione, beginning to worry about all the things that could go wrong.

"The minute I see them, before they have a chance to affect me too much, I'll start blasting them with a Patronus Charm. With you by my side, I'll have no trouble thinking of happy thoughts. I should be able to hold them off. As soon as we're out in the open, I'll give you the signal to jump on my back. I'll hold on to you as if I'm giving you a piggy-back and then I'll transform – and start warming this place up a bit."

“Rick, you have to promise me one thing,” said Hermione, very seriously. “If things go wrong – if your Patronus doesn’t manage to hold off all those Dementors, I want you to Apparate away, before they overcome you. If I die here, it will only be the end of Hermione Granger. But if you die, it will be the end of all hope for the Light. Ultimately, it will be the end of Harry, Ron and all his family, Albus Dumbledore, all the Muggle-born witches and wizards, the Squibs ... so many thousands of good people. Rick, you can’t risk all that for me, I won’t let you. God! If only my mind had been clearer – if only I’d thought of it, I never would have tried to summon you! Rick you must promise me; otherwise, I’m not coming with you!”

“I promise you my plan will work Hermione; now stop worrying, it’s time to go!”

“Sorry, Rick, but unless you give me a Wizard’s Oath that you won’t risk your own life, I’m staying here!” said Hermione, with rock-solid determination.

Rick could see he was not going to convince her. He was also wondering if he, as Rick, would be bound by a Wizard’s Oath sworn by his Animagus Lorikeet, but he didn’t have time to think about it. It was time to go.

“OK,” said Rick, reluctantly, “I swear it. Oh, and by the way, I am going to look like Lucius Malfoy, I’m sure you can figure out why —”

“Of course I can,” said Hermione, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s a clever idea, disguise yourself and confuse the enemy at the same time. Although I can’t say I’m going to enjoy having you looking like that arrogant creep. So when, exactly, were you planning on telling me you’re an Animagus – and a Metamorphmagus?” she asked, sounding somewhat vexed.

“I’m sorry Hermione, I wasn’t trying to hide it from you, I just didn’t think of telling you. It didn’t seem important – until now. Umm ... we really should get out of here, you know. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready, but you’ll have to do something about these manacles,” said Hermione, holding up her wrists.

“Right!” said Rick. He changed back to his human form, but then immediately morphed himself to look like Lucius Malfoy again. He magicked away Hermione’s manacles, drew his wand, and blasted away the door. He figured that his Patronus might be stronger if he used Godric Gryffindor’s wand. He grabbed Hermione’s hand and dashed out of the cell and down the corridor towards the stairs. But before they even reached them, Dementors began swarming out from the top of the stairway.

Rick immediately pointed his wand and bellowed “Expecto Patronum!” The result was staggering. Around fifty silvery, and very corporeal Patronuses burst from the end of his wand and launched themselves at the Dementors with fury. There were bulls, birds, bison, bats ... almost every animal imaginable. But Rick didn’t have time to admire his handiwork, because Hermione had just pointed out another group of Dementors that were bearing down upon them from the other end of the corridor. Rick turned his wand on them and yelled out “Expecto Patronum!” Again, a host of Patronuses erupted from the end of his wand and beat the Dementors into a retreat.

They continued to the top of the stairs. There were no Dementors in sight. But just to be sure, Rick sent forth another phalanx of Patronuses ahead of them down the stairs to clear the way. Then hand-in-hand they raced down the stairs as fast as they could go. The courtyard was packed with Dementors. The Patronuses had driven them away from the stairway. Although the Dementors could not approach Rick and Hermione, they could still affect them. Rick started to feel their chill creep into him, he felt himself begin to waver under the combined influence of the hundreds and hundreds of Dementors packed into the courtyard. Hermione felt them too, and sensing Rick’s hesitation she said desperately, “It’s no good Rick, there are too many of them, you have to go. Please, Apparate away – now!!”

But Rick didn’t go, he squeezed Hermione’s hand to give him strength as he unleashed another volley of Patronuses. Some of the Dementors were driven out of the courtyard, while others cowered in the corners. Rick felt the chill subside a little. He dragged Hermione to the centre of the courtyard, handed her his wand, and told her to

jump up on his back. He held her tightly as he closed his eyes and concentrated on transforming into a dragon.

One moment, Hermione was taking a piggy-back ride on Rick's back, the next, she felt herself being heaved up into the air. She flailed around desperately with her hands, managing to grasp hold of something thick. Momentarily, things stopped moving, and she saw that she was holding on to some kind of strap, that seemed to be part of the harness holding a large saddle in place on the dragon's back. Everything started moving again. With difficulty, she dragged herself over the rough scales along the strap and finally seated herself in the saddle. There was a kind of belt, which she strapped across her lap. It held her securely in the saddle.

The dragon was a Norwegian Ridgeback, and it was immense – over thirty feet long. Several very distinct black ridges ran down its back, which was protected by thick black scales. It had two huge yellow eyes with vertical pupils, and its head was crowned by two large, vicious-looking, bronze-coloured horns. It was a fearsome sight, completely dominating the Azkaban courtyard.

From her vantage point, high on the dragon's back, Hermione saw that the Dementors were no longer cowering in the corners of the courtyard. The Patronuses were dissipating and were no longer able to keep them in check. She felt a fearful chill oppressing her as they began closing in on her. She pulled Rick's wand from her robes and pointed it at a Dementor that was heading straight towards her. Desperately, she searched for a happy thought, but there was only fear and misery in her mind, at that moment. Suddenly, flames erupted from the dragon's mouth sending the Dementor fleeing. It made a terrible screeching noise as it glided rapidly away. The dragon turned in a circle, breathing vast sheets of fire at the approaching Dementors. The flames repelled them almost as effectively as the Patronuses. While they were beating their retreat, the dragon unfurled its gigantic black wings and began flapping them. Slowly, it rose up into the air, while blasting a solid wall of fire downwards to dissuade the Dementors from following.

As the dragon gained altitude, it began flying quickly to the east. Hermione looked behind them; there was no sign of Dementors

giving chase. The dragon's flight was surprisingly smooth, and Hermione felt quite secure strapped into the saddle on its massive back. It wasn't quite as comfortable as a jumbo jet, but it wasn't too bad. The main thing was that she was free of the Dementors and the terrible misery she had been feeling during the past few hours at Azkaban.

Hermione realised they had not discussed where they would go once they got away from Azkaban. Would Rick risk being seen as a dragon by Muggles? What was he planning to do? Where would he go? Damn it! she thought, it's a pity dragons can't talk. But her questions were soon answered. As they neared the coastline, the dragon gained altitude, so they would not be visible – or at least recognisable – from the ground. Hermione was getting very cold. She used Rick's wand to cast a heating charm around the saddle. She guessed that Rick would head for Hogwarts – and she was right. Twenty minutes later, she spotted the castle and the lake.

Rick began to descend in a wide corkscrew spiral, coming down behind Hagrid's hut. He figured Hagrid would be up at the castle with the other teachers and any students staying over, enjoying his Christmas meal. The last thing he needed was to have Hagrid start petting and pampering him, and then being heartbroken when the dragon suddenly disappeared. Fortunately, Rick's guess was correct; no one spotted a large Norwegian Ridgeback making an unscheduled landing at Hogwarts that Christmas Day.

Hermione suddenly found herself sitting on Rick's back. She had him pinned to the ground. She quickly jumped off and helped him to his feet. Then she threw her arms around him and kissed him. It was a long kiss. Neither of them noticed that it was, in fact, a very cold and wintry day. Hand-in-hand, they trudged happily up the snow-covered path to the castle, and made their way directly to the Headmaster's office.

"Fickle Fudge," laughed Rick at the Headmaster's 'sweet pun' on the Minister of Magic, as he gave the password to the stone gargoyle, which jumped aside, to reveal the moving stone staircase. The door to the Headmaster's office was slightly ajar. Rick knocked, and as there was no reply, they entered. Professor Snape was sprawled, lost

in thought, in a comfortable armchair, obviously waiting for the Headmaster to return from the Christmas dinner. When he saw Rick and Hermione enter, he jumped from his chair in complete shock.

“Miss Granger, what on earth?! ... However did you manage to —” he began with an expression of incredulity on his face. But then he stopped himself.

“Escape from Azkaban, Professor?” asked Hermione, finishing his question for him.

“Yes, exactly,” said Snape. “Are you alright Miss Granger?” He asked, more in disbelief than concern.

“I am now Professor, thanks to —” But Rick quickly nudged her, and she stopped abruptly.

Snape turned and stared hard at Rick with a withering gaze. “Mr. Godfry, you are always so full of surprises.... perhaps you had something to do with Miss Granger’s inexplicable escape?”

“Err ... no, I’m ... err, I’m just, err, offering her emotional support, sir,” said Rick weakly.

“Mr. Godfry! Allow me to give you a little advice. Whatever other abilities you may possess, you are an utterly incompetent and unconvincing liar. Your attempts at deceit are totally transparent. Deception is an art ... an art which you do not possess. Please do not insult my intelligence by expecting me to believe such patent drivel,” said Snape, with his customary sarcasm.

“Err, thank you, sir,” replied Rick.

“What?” demanded Snape.

“Thank you, for the good advice, sir,” replied Rick innocently.

“Godfry, that’s enough of your cheek —”

But at that moment, the Headmaster entered his office. His face lit up with a joyful smile and an expression of immense relief when he saw Hermione and Rick. "Thank goodness you have been safely rescued from Azkaban, Miss Granger. How are you feeling? Have you been harmed in any way?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

"No, sir, I'm a little tired, but other than that I'm fine," replied Hermione.

"Excuse me Headmaster," said Snape, approaching Dumbledore. "But how did you know that Miss Granger had been taken to Azkaban? I had just come to your office, to give you that very news. And how on earth did she manage to escape from that place? It's simply not possible! No one has ever escaped from there ... no one except for ... Black. I am very curious as to how Miss Granger escaped – in fact, I was just asking her – and Mr. Godfrey," he added, turning his questioning gaze, once more, upon Rick, "that very question, when you arrived. They seem reluctant to tell me."

"Yes, Severus," said Dumbledore, with a smile, as he seated himself comfortably in the chair behind his huge desk. "I imagine they are. But I am certain that you – of all people – understand the value of a well-kept secret. I must request that you do not press them further on this matter. Rest assured, I will fully debrief them, and pass on anything you need to know."

"Certainly, Headmaster," said Snape, curtly. Much as his curiosity begged to be satisfied, he understood very well the importance of secrets. His situation as a double agent was a precarious one. Every time he went to the Dark Lord, or to meet with fellow Death Eaters, there was always the possibility of exposure – which would result in him being subjected to torture or Veritaserum – most likely both. The less he knew of Dumbledore's secrets, the better. Snape nodded his head towards the Headmaster, then turned and left the office.

When the door closed behind Snape, Dumbledore rose from his chair and approached Hermione. "I am greatly relieved to see you alive and well Miss Granger. Are you quite certain that you are unharmed by your ordeal? Perhaps it would be wise to visit Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing and let her at least check you over."

"No, honestly, I'm fine Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione. Then smiling at him she added, "And just in case you were trying to get rid of me, so that Rick can give you the no holds barred details of how he rescued me, I think you should know that I am aware of all his secrets; including the origin of his amazing magical powers. I am also aware of his ghostly nom de guerre."

"Well done, Miss Granger, well done!" said Dumbledore. Much to Hermione's surprise he seemed delighted, rather than annoyed. "I knew it was only a matter of time before you solved the enigma of Rick Godfry. I am most impressed that you succeeded so quickly. It's only a pity that it's all such a secret – otherwise I would award house points to Gryffindor, for your brilliant sleuthing. You have a remarkable mind. However, please understand," he added in a more serious tone, "that you must keep your discoveries about Mr. Godfry a secret – from everyone – including Messrs Potter and Weasley."

"Yes sir, I understand completely," replied Hermione. "You can rely upon it. I promise not to tell a soul."

"Very good, Miss Granger, thank you. Now please be seated, both of you," he said, summoning a comfortable couch for them, before returning to his own chair and settling himself comfortably behind his desk. "I believe you have missed your Christmas dinner. So first of all, let's put that to rights," he said, picking up a small bell from his table and giving it a tinkle. A moment later, there was a pop, and Dobby the house-elf appeared before the Headmaster.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir, Dobby is wanting to wish Headmaster Dumbledore a Merry Christmas. And how may Dobby be of service to you, Professor, sir?"

"Thank you Dobby, and a Merry Christmas to you. I was wondering if perhaps there was a little something left over from the excellent Christmas feast. If there is, could you please bring some for Miss Granger and Mr. Godfry here," he said, pointing to the couch behind the house-elf.

Dobby turned around and saw Hermione and Rick. "Oh, Miss Hermione Granger, Dobby is not seeing you there!" squeaked the house-elf in delight. "Merry Christmas to you – and to Master Rick Godfry. Dobby is wanting very much to thank you for all the beautiful socks and hats you is leaving for Dobby under the house-elves' Christmas tree. Miss Hermione is too kind to Dobby – Dobby is not worthy," said the house-elf bowing his head humbly before Hermione, whom he held in great awe and esteem.

"But Dobby," said Hermione, "the socks and hats under the tree were for all of the Hogwarts house-elves, they weren't all supposed to be for you. Remember, you gave me a list of the names of all the Hogwarts house-elves. I put a present under the tree for each one."

"I ... I, is very sorry Miss Granger," said Dobby awkwardly, hanging his head and avoiding Hermione's eyes. "But the house-elves are very suspecting when they see the presents under the Christmas tree. They is never getting Christmas presents – ever! They is making Dobby open his present first. When they is seeing clothes inside, they is getting very angry – they isn't wanting to open their presents. They is saying Dobby is having all the presents. Dobby is very sorry, Miss Granger," said the poor, dejected elf.

"There, there, Dobby" said Dumbledore, his eyes dancing with amusement. "I'm sure you did your very best. Despite Miss Granger's great efforts at educating them, your fellow house-elves do not seem at all keen to follow your example and throw off the shackles of servitude. I'm sure Miss Granger doesn't blame you in the least. However ... if we don't find some food for her soon, she may just die of hunger ..."

"Oh, no sir, Dobby is not letting Miss Granger die of hunger!" squeaked the elf with concern, and with a pop he was gone. Half a minute later, he reappeared with another pop, balancing a huge silver tray on one hand. He snapped the fingers of his other hand and a low table appeared before Hermione and Rick. He placed the tray down on the table, bowed to them, and then turning and bowing to Professor Dumbledore, he vanished – with a pop.

It was a veritable banquet and Hermione was famished. For once in her life, she was more interested in eating than talking. After telling the Headmaster how she had been abducted by the Portkey present, and of her encounter with Bellatrix Lestrange at Azkaban, she fell upon the food, with relish, and let Rick tell the Headmaster the story of the rescue from Azkaban.

“You certainly made good use of your Animagus forms,” said the Headmaster to Rick, when he finished his account. “It is fortunate indeed, that you were able to perform the Animagus Transformation into a mouse, even in such a weakened state. It sounds like you were only moments away from losing your soul.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione, quickly swallowing a mouthful of roast turkey. “Please don’t think me ungrateful, but you really shouldn’t have allowed Rick to risk his life to save me. It’s not just his life that was at stake. Countless other lives would have been lost, if Rick had died at Azkaban. The future of the wizarding world depends upon him. How could you have allowed him to risk so much, for one person?” Rick, meanwhile, had become very interested in the food.

Dumbledore sighed. “You are quite right, Miss Granger, it was an enormous risk. I pointed this out most forcefully to Mr. Godfrey – but I was unable to dissuade him from rushing to your rescue. There is clearly a very strong magical bond between the two of you. In the end, that terrible decision was his to make, not mine. I must say, in hindsight, that I am very happy with his choice,” he added with a benevolent smile.

“When you have finished your meal, I suggest you go together to visit your parents, Miss Granger. They must be very worried about you by now. It would be best, if the two of you then proceed to the Burrow, for the remainder of the holidays,” added Dumbledore. “I want Rick close to Harry, but it is clear that you too, are now a target, Miss Granger. Perhaps Rick will find an opportunity to begin some special training, with both you and Mr. Potter.”

“What special training is that?” asked Hermione, immediately curious.

“Ah,” said Professor Dumbledore, smiling at her, “it appears that Mr. Godfry has not yet told you about it. Professor McGonagall informed me last term that she believes both you and Mr. Potter are capable of mastering the Animagus Transformation.”

“Really?” gasped Hermione with excitement. “I’ve wanted to be an Animagus – so much – ever since our third year. I read every book in the library about it. But it was all rather discouraging. Firstly, those with the innate ability to perform the transformation are very rare. Then you need a teacher, who must be an Animagus themselves. You have to be at least seventeen years old before you can even apply for permission to begin training. The special Ministry committee you have to apply to only meets once a year; and they take ages and ages to decide. They haven’t approved a single application in the past ten years. It’s virtually impossible —”

“To do it legally,” said the Headmaster, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement. He had waited patiently until Hermione was forced to pause for a breath of air, before interrupting her.

“Professor McGonagall is, you may have noticed, a very proper witch, who believes in following the rules – no matter how absurd they may be. She would, of course, teach you if I requested it of her as a special favour. However, she would feel most uncomfortable. Fortunately, we have an alternative – in Mr. Godfry, here. Given his special gifts, I believe that he may be able to accelerate the process. I have asked him to work with you both, next term. I hardly need tell you that it is completely illegal, and must, therefore, remain a secret between the four of us.”

“Enough of that for now,” said the Headmaster. “Your parents must be very worried, Miss Granger. If I may, I would suggest that you explain your disappearance to them as a prank, gone awry. If they knew the truth, it would only cause them unnecessary worry.”

“Yes, Professor,” agreed Hermione. “But what shall we tell everyone at the Burrow? They’ll want to know where I was held, and how I escaped. I can’t tell them the truth, without exposing Rick.”

“Quite right,” agreed Dumbledore. After musing for a few moments he said, “I would not advise you to lie to your friends, Miss Granger. However, neither can you tell them the truth. You may tell them that I expressly requested both of you not to divulge what happened – because, it would risk revealing things which I consider advantageous to our side, to remain secret for now. I am, in fact, asking you to do just that. So it will be perfectly true. Now it’s time to say goodbye,” he said, rising from his chair. “I hope you both enjoy what is left of your holiday,” said the Headmaster, smiling at them fondly.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 16 - Back to the Burrow

Fortunately for Rick, he and Hermione spent only an hour with Hermione's parents. But it was more than enough for Rick. The Grangers were both very nice, but after they got over their joy and relief that Hermione was safe and sound, they became very interested in Rick – much too interested – for Rick's liking. It was obvious that either Hermione had told her parents about their relationship, or else, they had guessed – but guessed what? Rick was feeling very embarrassed and awkward. It didn't help that they wanted to know all about him – where he was from, his family and everything. His fabricated answers didn't seem to satisfy them. If they didn't suspect him of lying to them, they certainly suspected him of concealing things – which, of course, he was – very significant things.

Rick managed to get Mrs. Granger on side, fairly quickly – the old charm never failed him with females of all ages. But Mr. Granger was another matter. There was no chance of charming him. Hermione did her best to deflect her father's attention away from Rick. It was obvious that he was extremely fond of his daughter – and also very protective.

Rick had to withstand a fierce interrogation from Mr. Granger, while Hermione was packing her trunk. He was greatly relieved when she returned, all packed and ready to go. Hermione explained that they were going to Apparate to the Burrow. However, it was clear that Hermione had previously told her parents all about the age and licence requirements – not to mention the dangers of improper Apparition.

"But you don't have a licence and you haven't learned how to Apparate yet, dear," said Mrs. Granger to her daughter, with concern.

"It's OK," said Rick. "I've been doing it for years. The Apparition age is much lower in New Zealand, and it's perfectly safe for me to Apparate another person with me. That's how we got here."

"Be very careful with my daughter, young man," said Mr. Granger in an almost threatening tone. "If any harm comes to her, or if she is hurt in any way, you'll have me to answer to – remember that!"

“Err, yes sir,” replied Rick nervously. It was not lost on him that Mr. Granger was talking about more than Apparition. He quickly took out his wand and waved it at Hermione’s trunk, transforming it into a pretty bracelet. This surprised and impressed Hermione’s parents, and had the desired effect of defusing the tense situation. Hermione allowed her father to put the bracelet around her left wrist and then hugged and kissed her parents goodbye.

“Err, goodbye Mr. and Mrs. Granger,” said Rick awkwardly. “It’s been a real pleasure meeting you.” He then took Hermione’s hand in his, and with great relief Apparated to the Burrow.

They Apparated to just outside the Ward line. Rick removed Hermione’s bracelet from her wrist and transformed it back into a trunk.

“Oh,” said Hermione, disappointed at losing her lovely bracelet. “I really liked it, Rick. It’s the first thing you ever gave me.”

“Sorry,” said Rick. He picked up a stone and transformed it into an identical bracelet. “Merry Christmas,” he said, placing it around her wrist. He was just about to kiss her when he heard the sound of excited voices approaching them.

“Hermione! Hermione!” yelled Ron, running towards them. “You’re safe! You’re alive!”

“Stop!” boomed a gruff voice from behind Ron. “Don’t go any closer – anyone! Especially you Harry! Wait for me! Everyone, stay well back from the fence, this could be a trap!”

Ron stopped. Harry caught up with him, and then came Ginny, the twins and the dark-haired witch, Griselda. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley joined them and finally Mad-Eye Moody hobbled up, on his wooden leg, positioning himself protectively in front of everyone. They were about thirty yards away from Hermione and Rick.

“Draw your wands, everyone,” barked Mad-Eye. “Have you never heard of Polyjuice Potion? Merlin knows – I have! They could be anyone masquerading as your friends. Nice as it might be to believe that your friend Hermione has gotten away from Voldemort, it would be a bloody miracle! The odds are dead against it. They’re a damn sight longer than the odds of those two being a couple of Death Eaters – disguised as your friends – come to attack, or abduct Harry.”

“Right you two,” yelled Moody to Hermione and Rick. “Don’t move as much as one inch closer, or I’ll hex you to Hades. Stay right where you are, until we’ve positively identified you. Ron, Harry, ask them some questions that no one but your friends would be able to answer,” ordered the paranoid ex-Auror.

Ron thought for a minute, then said, “Hermione, what potion ingredient did we steal in second year? What was it for, and how did we get it?”

“We were in Potions. Harry threw a Filibuster fireworks into Goyle's cauldron,” said Hermione, laughing as she remembered it. “The Swelling Solution potion exploded, splattering most of the class. Malfoy got it in the face – his nose swelled up like a balloon. While Snape was distracted by the chaos, I ducked into his private stores and nicked a whole lot of his Boomslang skin. We needed it to make Polyjuice Potion, which you and Harry used to disguise yourselves as Crabbe and Goyle, so you could infiltrate the Slytherin common room.”

“Spot on,” said Ron. “No one knew that but the three of us.”

“Ronald Weasley!” began a furious Mrs. Weasley, “How could you involve yourself in such a flagrant breach of ... I don’t know how many school rules! Stealing from Professor Snape —”

“Hey, good one!” said Fred, in admiration. “Who would have thought that Ickle Ronniekins had it in him, George?”

“Right Fred,” replied his twin. “I think our little Ron’s earned the right to call us his brothers – nicking stuff from Snape’s private stores – our

very own establishment of preference, for purloining quality pranking ingredients.”

Mrs. Weasley was looking outraged and was about to launch into another tirade, but Mr. Weasley was having trouble hiding his amusement – and delight – at the trio’s accomplishments, especially in getting one over on Snape.

“That’s enough,” barked Moody at the twins. “Stop fooling around. It seems that the girl must be Hermione Granger,” he conceded, somewhat unwillingly. “But we still don’t know if the other one is really Godfry. Go on, ask him something.”

“What’s the colour and design of your favourite boxers?” asked Harry, laughing – quite certain now that these were his friends.

“That’s a bit of a personal question,” replied Rick, also laughing. “Actually, I think I’m wearing them, so why don’t I just pull down my —”

“No! Don’t do that, there are young witches present,” interrupted a scandalised Mrs. Weasley. “That won’t be necessary – a description will be fine, Rick dear.”

Rick could barely stop laughing. “Well, my very favourites, the ones that you were admiring when I was unpacking my trunk are bright red. They have all different kinds of dragons on them, flying about.”

“Do they breathe fire?” asked Ginny, giggling.

“That will be enough from you, young lady,” said her mother, trying to sound severe, but spoiling the effect by snorting. “Alastor, I think they’ve proved themselves, please let them come in. Who knows what they’ve been through? They may be hurt.”

“Alright,” said Mad-Eye, grudgingly, but he didn’t put his wand away.

Harry and Ron rushed over to Hermione and hugged her. They were so happy to have her back alive. Although neither of them had said it aloud to anyone, they had both feared that they would never see their

best friend alive again. This had been the most terrible Christmas Day of their lives. The mood at the Burrow had been sombre and serious. No one had been able to think of anything hopeful to say, so they had remained silent. Then Mad-Eye Moody arrived with Griselda. Dumbledore had sent them to help guard Harry in Rick's absence; although the reason he had given them was to make sure that Harry stayed at the Burrow, and did not try dashing-off to rescue Hermione. The presence of the paranoid ex-Auror did absolutely nothing to lift their spirits. He would have been a great success in the undertaking trade.

"Tell us the whole story," said Ginny eagerly, after hugging and kissing Hermione.

"Now everyone, just wait a minute!" said Mrs. Weasley, lifting up Hermione's arms to make a quick inspection. "They've just been through a terrible experience, they may be hurt. Everyone, please be quite for a moment. Hermione, dear, are you hurt or injured?"

"No, I'm fine Mrs. Weasley, honestly I am," Hermione replied.

"Are you sure, my dear? You weren't harmed in any way?" asked Mrs. Weasley, with motherly concern.

"My only injury is the loss of a lock of my hair," said Hermione. "Apart from that, I'm absolutely fine, honestly, Mrs. Weasley."

"How about you, Rick, dear?" asked Mrs. Weasley, turning her attention to him.

"I'm just fine, thank you Mrs. Weasley, really, I am," Rick assured her.

"Well, come on then," said Ron, impatiently. "Tell us what happened to you – we want to know how you escaped!"

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, awkwardly, "but I can't. Professor Dumbledore asked us not to talk about what happened. He said if we did, it would risk revealing things that were best kept secret for now. I'd really like to tell you. But for the moment, I can't."

“But why not?” complained Ginny. “Can’t you at least tell us how you were captured, and where you were taken?”

“I guess I can tell you how I was captured,” said Hermione. “Somehow, Voldemort placed a present under our Christmas tree, with my name on it. It was some kind of book. But when I unwrapped it, and touched it, I was pulled away. It was a Portkey! Please don’t ask me any more questions; I really can’t answer them – I have to respect Professor Dumbledore’s wishes.”

“Hermione’s right,” said Mr. Weasley. “If Dumbledore said not to talk about it, he has his reasons, and we should all respect them. He knows a lot of things that no one else knows.”

“That’s right,” agreed Mad-Eye. “The best way to make sure your enemy doesn’t learn your secrets is not to tell anyone – except those who absolutely need to know – not even your closest friends. People can be captured – as we’ve all just seen. They can be tortured, given Veritaserum, or tricked into divulging secrets. But what they don’t know, they can’t say. It’s the golden rule in the Auror division. Only tell people what they need to know. Now everyone, leave them alone – no more questions,” he said gruffly.

“Come on, everyone, let’s go inside,” said Mrs. Weasley. “It’s time for Christmas tea, and afterwards we can have a party to celebrate Hermione’s safe return. We haven’t had anything to celebrate yet today – but now we do!”

“Yeah, great idea,” said Fred. “George, my lad, maybe we should enter into the festive spirit by donating some of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes’ finest confectionary.”

“Capital idea!” said George. “Agreed! Griselda, my dear, have you ever had the pleasure of indulging yourself in Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes Fabulous Fruity Frogs?”

“Come on guys,” laughed Griselda. “You don’t think I’m that gullible to you? Sorry, but to get through Auror training, you need to have a very well-developed sense of scepticism. Plus, I’ve been working with Mad-Eye for the past year. I’m Constant Vigilance personified. Go

find yourselves another bunny. You could always try Mad-Eye,” she suggested, with a wicked grin. Everyone laughed. There was no way the paranoid Moody would ever touch any of the twins’ creations; but still, the image of Mad-Eye, turned into a Tangelo Toad, hopping about with a wooden leg was most amusing.

“Boy – talk about a hard case,” sighed Fred.

“Well, sod the Fruity Frogs then. Allow us to show you the wonderful Christmas decorations in the lounge, they’re most impressive,” said George putting an arm through Griselda’s.

“Yes,” agreed Fred. “We have some highly unusual ornaments. Allow us to give you the guided tour,” he added enthusiastically, taking the attractive young witch’s other arm.

Ginny almost collapsed giggling, as her brothers whisked Griselda back to the house.

“What’s so funny?” asked Hermione.

“Enchanted Mistletoe!” giggled Ginny. “Fred and George put some up in the lounge.”

“What does it do?” asked Harry.

“Well, it sort of....” started Ginny. Then she had a better idea. “Umm, it’s kind of hard to explain. Harry, come on, I’ll show you,” she said, grinning enthusiastically.

“Ginny, don’t you dare ...” said Mrs. Weasley. But Ginny was already dragging a curious Harry off to the house.

Rick smiled at Hermione and whispered in her ear, “This Enchanted Mistletoe sounds interesting; maybe we should go investigate.”

As they approached the lounge, Griselda came storming out – very red-faced. She was followed by Fred and George, who were both looking sore and sorry for themselves. Each was rubbing a very red cheek. Entering the lounge they found Harry and Ginny in a

passionate embrace, but the pair jumped apart when they finally noticed Rick and Hermione. Harry was most embarrassed, but Ginny was looking extremely happy and pleased with herself.

“So, umm, how does Enchanted Mistletoe work then?” asked Hermione, getting more curious by the moment.

“I’ll show you,” said Ginny, with a wicked grin. She grabbed Rick’s arm, and before he realised what she was up to, she had dragged him under the clump of Enchanted Mistletoe. Rick suddenly felt the irresistible urge to kiss Ginny, but as they began to kiss, he felt himself being dragged away by a very irate Hermione.

“Rick! How could you?” demanded Hermione, furious with him for kissing Ginny.

“Oops! My mistake! I didn’t realise that Rick was your exclusive property, but I do now – and it was such a nice way to find out,” said Ginny, smirking.

“Well, Rick certainly knew – didn’t you Rick?” demanded Hermione, turning angrily on him. “How could you kiss Ginny – and right in front of me, too?!”

“Err, Hermione,” said Rick guiltily. “You haven’t come across Enchanted Mistletoe in your reading then, have you?”

“Of course not,” she replied irritably. “Why would I be asking Ginny what it is, if I already knew?”

“It’s, err ... it’s kind of hard to explain how it works. You really need to, err... to experience it,” said Rick, walking back under the Enchanted Mistletoe. “Come on, Hermione, come over here – I’ll show you.”

“Not bloody likely! Not after you’ve just been snogging Ginny – and would probably still be snogging – if I hadn’t dragged you away. What gall – to think I would want to kiss you after that – you ... you —”

“Well, if you don’t want to kiss Rick, I wouldn’t mind going another round with him under the Enchanted Mistletoe,” said Ginny, with a big grin as she walked back towards Rick.

“Ginny Weasley! Don’t you dare kiss Rick again, or I’ll never, ever speak to you again!” yelled Hermione. In desperation, she rushed over to push Ginny away from Rick. But Rick managed to grab Hermione and pulled her under the Enchanted Mistletoe.

Suddenly, Hermione found that she wasn’t angry with Rick anymore. She didn’t want to yell at him ... she just wanted to ... kiss him – very, very much. They kissed for a long time – and it might have been a lot longer if they hadn’t finally been interrupted by loud applause from Ginny, Ron, Harry and the twins.

“Where did you all come from?” gasped Hermione, turning bright red with embarrassment. “Oh my! Err ... so, err ... so that’s what Enchanted Mistletoe does,” she stammered. “It kind of makes you really want to kiss, doesn’t it?” she said – as if she’d never wanted to kiss Rick before in her life – or ever kissed him, for that matter. “Err ... I think I better get away from here,” she squeaked, as she noticed Fred and George coming towards her with big grins on their faces.

They had a great party that night. Everyone was in high spirits – especially after Mad-Eye Moody was called away to another assignment by Dumbledore – he really was a bit of a party-pooper. Unfortunately for Fred and George, Griselda went with him. But they amused themselves – and everyone else, with their tricks, and by doing summoning charms on the Enchanted Mistletoe. They caught Hermione with Rick a couple of times, and also Ginny with Harry – but only when their parents weren’t present.

After breakfast the next morning, Mrs. Weasley sent Ron and Ginny out to de-gnome the garden. The twins had returned their own digs. She absolutely forbade Harry, Hermione, and Rick to help – they were guests, after all. The three of them were sitting, drinking hot chocolate at the kitchen table.

“Maybe we can get started with our special training,” said Hermione, looking up from her book. It was her Christmas present from Rick, ‘A Theoretical Appreciation of the Animagus Transformation’. She’d been deeply engrossed in it since getting up that morning.

“OK,” said Rick. “Let’s go up to my room; we don’t want anyone to know about it. Come on, Harry.”

“What ‘special training’ is this?” asked Harry.

“Wait till we get upstairs, and I’ll tell you all about it,” said Hermione.

When they got to Rick’s room, Hermione told Harry what Dumbledore had said, about the two of them becoming Animagi, and Rick helping them.

“Wow!” exclaimed Harry, looking a little stunned. “Ever since third year, when I found out that my dad was one, I’ve wanted to be an Animagus – but I never really thought I’d be able to, so I kind of stopped thinking about it. So you’re also an Animagus, Rick – I should have guessed – your powers seem to be limitless. What’s your Animagus form?”

“Err ... well actually, I can change into quite a few different animals,” said Rick, a little uneasily.

“I didn’t know that was possible. I’ve never heard of that before. Have you ever read of anyone who could do that, Hermione?” asked Harry.

“Err, no,” said Hermione. “But it’s true. During my rescue, Rick turned into quite a few different animals. Go on Rick, show him – but not the dragon! Not in here!”

“Dragon?!” asked Harry, incredulously. “You can turn into a dragon?”

“Err, yeah,” said Rick. “A Norwegian Ridgeback, actually. Just the thing when you need a bit of firepower ... Squeak! Squeak!” Rick had just turned into a tiny brown mouse.

“Oh, how adorable,” said Hermione, picking it up and scratching it affectionately behind the ears. She hadn’t seen Rick’s mouse Animagus before, and she was captivated. Suddenly, she found herself holding a large, grey tabby cat. “Mmm, you’re lovely too,” she said, hugging it. Rick purred contentedly, and then suddenly squawked, as he changed into a brightly-coloured Lorikeet and began flying around the room.

“That’s what I want to be,” said Harry, wistfully, “some kind of bird. I want to fly.”

Rick came down and landed on Harry’s shoulder. “OK, the show’s over – time for you two to get to work!”

Harry almost fell off the bed. “You can talk!”

“Of course, listen,” said Rick. “Polly want a cracker!”

While Harry and Hermione were laughing, Rick transformed back into his human form.

“It says in my Animagus book that the most difficult part of becoming an Animagus is discovering your true Animagus form – your inner animal. Normal Animagi only have one,” said Hermione, looking pointedly at Rick. “It says that one of the main roles of the teacher is to help the student discover their true form. Do you have any idea how to do that Rick?”

“Umm, I’m not sure,” said Rick. “Maybe if you come over here, and sit in my lap for a bit, it might help.”

“Help what?” laughed Harry, grinning slyly. “Shall I go get the Enchanted Mistletoe?”

“No, really, I’m serious,” said Rick, feeling a bit embarrassed. “I want to see if I can visualise Hermione’s Animagus form.”

“Well, I’m game,” said Hermione, with a smirk. “But I can’t wait until it’s your turn, Harry!” She went over to Rick who was sitting in an old armchair in the corner of the room and sat in his lap. Rick pulled her

close, and pressed his forehead against hers. He sat like that, concentrating hard, for several minutes. Finally, he released her saying, "I think I've got it."

"What is it?" asked Hermione, feeling excited – but also, unexpectedly, anxious. "Wait! Don't tell me! The teacher is only supposed to help the student, but the student must discover their Animagus form themselves."

"OK. Close your eyes," said Rick. "Imagine that you're in a forest. It's sunset, and you've just woken up. Feel yourself stretching out, sniffing the evening air for scents. Feel yourself pushing through the undergrowth, your senses all alert. You're thirsty, so you make your way down to a rock pool. You put one paw in the water, and as you lean over to drink, you catch sight of your reflection, you see —"

"A fox! I'm a fox!" squealed Hermione, jumping about the room in delight.

"Why didn't I guess," laughed Harry, "that you'd turn out to be something wise and cunning. It's so obvious!"

"Right, Harry, your turn now ... err, let's see if we can do this without having you sitting in my lap."

"Agreed!" said Harry, with obvious relief.

"Let's try standing, facing each other," said Rick, getting up from the armchair. He put his hands on Harry's shoulders and pressed his forehead against Harry's. "Try to relax," said Rick. This was a lot more difficult than with Hermione – because their special link had made it easy for him. They stayed standing that way for almost a quarter of an hour. Finally, Rick pulled back his forehead, but kept hold of Harry's shoulders.

"Keep your eyes closed, Harry," said Rick. "Feel yourself, high up in the air above the Forbidden Forest. Feel the wind ruffling your feathers. Now, you feel the air becoming warmer. You've found a thermal. You stretch your wings wide, holding them still as the thermal pushes you higher. Suddenly, far down below by a rock pool,

you spot something moving. You pull in your wings and dive straight down at an incredible speed, but as you pull out of the dive, you see that your quarry has spotted you. It disappears into the bushes. So you flap your powerful wings to regain altitude and fly towards the Hogwarts castle. As you cross the lake you descend a little, to admire your reflection on the water, it's —"

"An eagle," said Harry solemnly.

"A Golden Eagle, to be precise," added Rick.

"Wow!" said Hermione, in awe. "I did a project on them at school, before I came to Hogwarts. Their wingspan can reach up to nine feet; they fly at around thirty miles an hour, but they can reach speeds approaching two hundred miles an hour when diving."

"Wow!" said Harry, feeling slightly stunned.

"Golden Eagles have no natural predators," said Hermione, continuing her lecture. "They feed upon rabbits, hares, squirrels, and birds, such as grouse and partridge. They also occasionally take fish, snakes, insects, and larger mammals, such as young deer."

"Umm, what about foxes?" asked Harry, with a grin.

"Yes, foxes too," said Hermione. "Goodness! Do you think that was a fox you were diving for in your imagination? Perhaps it's not safe for us to train together."

"Don't worry," Rick reassured her. "In your Animagus form, although you'll feel the natural animal instincts, you will still be yourself. You will always know who you are, and you'll be in control."

"So what do we do next?" asked Harry, enthusiastically.

"It says in the book that you need to spend several months visualizing your Animagus form," said Hermione. "You should try to think of it frequently, throughout the day and concentrate on it when you go to bed at night, before falling asleep. But perhaps, with Rick helping us, it won't take that long."

“Yeah, I think I’ll be able to speed things up,” said Rick. “Just do the visualising for now. When we get back to Hogwarts, we can start working on transforming, OK? Come on Harry, how about we have another duelling session. You’ve been making really good progress; I think we should keep it up.”

“Great idea, let’s do it!” said Harry happily.

The rest of the holiday was pleasant, but uneventful. They returned to King’s Cross station, the same way they had come, by secure floo and then enchanted taxi, with a guard detail, courtesy of the Order.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Rick shared a compartment on the Hogwarts Express. They were joined at various times by different friends, coming to say hello. Padma Patil spent quite a lot of time with them. It was pretty obvious that she fancied Ron. Even Ron couldn’t fail to notice. Rick grinned to himself as he noticed Ron letting Padma beat him at a game of wizard chess. She was good, very good – but no match for Ron, with the way he had improved over Christmas.

As they pulled into Hogsmeade station and everyone began leaving the compartment, Rick grabbed Hermione’s hand and pulled her back. When the compartment was empty, he said to her, “Hermione, we’ve hardly had any time alone the last few days, how about a quick kiss, before we get off the train?”

“Yes, privacy’s a little hard to come by, at the Weasley’s,” said Hermione grinning and embracing Rick. But it wasn’t a quick kiss. It went on ... and on.... The two of them were in a world of their own, oblivious to whatever else might be happening – and something was most definitely happening.

The platform at Hogsmeade station was a simple affair. The station consisted of a long narrow building, running parallel to the tracks. It was possible to enter or leave the platform through several doorways

in the station building or at either end, which were completely open – or at least used to be completely open.

Today, however, when the students had disembarked from the train, and walked towards the Hogwarts end of the platform, to board the horseless carriages, a sheet of flames flew up in front of them, blocking their path. There were gasps and screams. Some students tried rushing down to the other end of the platform to escape, but another sheet of flames was blocking that end, also. They tried the doorways in the station building, but they were all locked shut and couldn't be opened by Alohomora or any other unlocking charm. Finally, they tried to re-board the train, but all the doors had closed and were also securely locked. They were trapped!

"I don't like this at all," said Harry to Ron. "Where the hell is Rick?"

About thirty or forty, masked, black-robed figures suddenly materialised on the platform – Death Eaters. "Students of Hogwarts," said a cold, female voice, amplified by a Sonorus charm. "Do not reach for your wands, and you will not be harmed. The Dark Lord wishes you no ill. On the contrary, some of the Purebloods among you will be invited to join the hallowed ranks of his Death Eaters when you have finished your schooling. Then your education will begin in earnest. We are here today for two students only – Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. The Dark Lord has issued a special invitation to them – one which he insists they accept," the cold voice added cruelly. "No one else has anything to fear – unless they get in our way. Be warned. Draw your wand, and you become a target."

"Don't expect that fool of a Headmaster, Dumbledore or anyone else from Hogwarts, to come to your rescue – they won't – we've taken care of them," she added, cackling gleefully.

"Bellatrix Lestrange!" spat Harry. "I'd recognise that hag's cackling anywhere!" He drew his wand and cast a Reflecting Shield around himself. "Put up a Deflecting Shield mate," he said to Ron, who was also standing, wand drawn. In fact, most of the students had drawn their wands. They weren't about to let Harry Potter and Hermione Granger be taken without putting up a fight.

“Stupid little children!” said Bellatrix Lestrange, derisively. “Don’t say you weren’t warned.” The students fought valiantly, but most of them were no match for trained Death Eaters. The DA members from last year, however, put up stiff resistance.

Eventually, the Death Eaters located Harry. It was obvious that their orders were to take him alive, because they weren’t using anything lethal on him. From behind his shield, Harry was letting loose with a variety of hexes. He had already disarmed three Death Eaters with Stupify and two others were lying flat on the platform after he hit them with the Petrificus Totalus spell. However, that was nothing compared to what they had done to themselves. Seven or eight Death Eaters had been hit by their own hexes, rebounding with double strength from Harry’s Reflecting Shield, but in the confusion, they hadn’t realised what was happening and continued flinging hexes at Harry.

Ron had taken out two Death Eaters before his shield collapsed and he was knocked out by a nasty Expelliarmus spell. By the time the Death Eaters had managed to subdue the students, over half of them were down. Clearly, they had not expected the students to put up such a valiant defence.

“Well, well, if it isn’t little baby Potter!” said Bellatrix in her mock baby voice, as she approached Harry, with the remaining Death Eaters. “It looks like someone has been teaching you —”

But she was cut off, as Harry yelled “Stupify!” She had to dive for the platform to avoid his curse. Harry had never held his Reflecting Shield for so long. It was beginning to drain him. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep it up. What the hell has happened to Rick? he asked himself.

Bellatrix Lestrange was back on her feet and dusting herself off. “So little baby Potter wants to play, does he?” she cackled insanely. “Where’s your little Mudblood friend, Potter? The Dark Lord was highly offended at the insolent little brat’s refusal of his gracious hospitality; she needs to be taught some manners. He’s extending his hospitality to her again – and he insists she accept it – along with you,” she cackled. “In fact, I’m going to make sure that you both

accept my Master's hospitality. Come on, little boy – the time for games is over.”

“Well, I don't think so!” yelled Harry. “You horrible hag, you killed Sirius, and I'm going to avenge his death, if it's the last thing I do!”

“Ha, ha!” cackled Bellatrix. “Have you forgotten what I told you in the Department of Mysteries, little Harry? You don't have what it takes to use an Unforgivable curse – you're too much of a goody, goody! Ha, ha!”

Harry struggled to hold up his Reflecting Shield; he wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. He had an idea. He concentrated all his energy on holding his shield and pointed his wand at her as if he was about to hex her.

“Let me show you how it's done.... Crucio!” she yelled gleefully. “Ahhhhhhhhh!” she screamed, as her Cruciatus Curse flew back and hit her – sending her writhing to the platform in utter agony. Fortunately for her, the spell was broken as she fell.

Several of the Death Eaters helped her to her feet. She was shaking and twitching violently, and looking even crazier than usual. “Well, well, the little Potter boy has learned how to hate. That was quite a Cruciatus Curse! My compliments. What a pity my Master wants you dead, Potter – you've got what it takes to be a great Death Eater. My Master would have preferred me to bring you to him alive ... but dead is preferable to allowing you to evade your fate yet again. It looks like I'm going to be the one who gets the pleasure – and the glory – of turning The Boy Who Lived into The Boy Who Died,” she cackled, raising her wand.

Harry knew what was coming, if only he could hold his Reflecting Shield for a few moments more. He tried desperately to hold it, but his energy was slowly draining away.

“Avada Kedavra!” screamed Bellatrix.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 17 - The Foxy Lady

Rick suddenly released Hermione from their passionate embrace, sensing that something was wrong. He opened the door of the train compartment, and rushed over to the windows along the corridor. The sight that greeted him was horrific. Students were sprawled everywhere. He could see the backs of the group of Death Eaters who had surrounded Harry, but he couldn't see beyond them. He couldn't see Harry anywhere. A terrible fear gripped his heart. Harry must be dead – unless he'd been taken to Voldemort. I've failed him, thought Rick. I've failed the great witches and wizards of the Light; I've failed Dumbledore; I've failed everyone – all because of my damn selfishness!

"My God," cried Hermione, looking through the windows and seeing the chaos and the Death Eaters on the platform.

"Stay here Hermione, get down, and stay out of sight," Rick said, vanishing. He had made himself invisible before Apparating to the Death Eaters on the platform.

The first thing he saw was Harry, lying on the platform. Rick immediately threw up a Reflecting Shield to protect him. He was incredibly relieved to discover that Harry was still alive. He looked like he had collapsed from exhaustion. There were about fifteen Death Eaters pointing their wands at Harry. Rick disarmed them, levitating their wands to dance high above their heads. He then put an Impediment Jinx on the astonished Death Eaters, to prevent them escaping. He found the rest of the Death Eaters lying scattered around the platform and levitated them over to join the others. He Ennervated the ones who were stunned, having already given their wands the same treatment as those of their fellow Death Eaters. Then he put an Impediment Jinx on them, as well.

Looking around, Rick could see that some of the students were hurt. He needed to get help. Rick Apparated to the other side of the sheet of flames, at one end of the platform. There were two Death Eaters maintaining it with some kind of spell. Rick levitated their wands and the flames immediately vanished. He levitated them over to join the

other Death Eaters, again using an Impediment Jinx to immobilise them. He did the same with the pair maintaining the sheet of flames at the other end of the platform.

After a quick scan to make sure all the Death Eaters were incapacitated, he Apparated to the Hogwarts gates, where he found four more Death Eaters maintaining another sheet of flames across the gateway. It was effectively trapping the Hogwarts staff within the Ward line of the school, which was very cunning, because the Hogwarts anti-Apparition Wards were preventing the teachers from Apparating out to help the students.

Rick disarmed the Death Eaters and immediately put an Impediment Jinx on them. The sheet of flames vanished to reveal Hagrid, along with Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout, looking bewildered. Since Rick was invisible, they could not understand, at first, how the Death Eaters had been stunned.

“The situation is under control, Headmaster,” said Rick, in the ethereal voice of the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. “But some of the students have been hurt and are in need of assistance. I suggest you Apparate to Hogsmeade Station at once. It will be my pleasure to deal with these Death Eaters.”

Rick Apparated the four Death Eaters back to the station, to add to his collection. Then he rushed over to see if Harry was OK. Professor Dumbledore had already found him, and was helping a shaky and exhausted-looking Harry to his feet. Rick breathed a huge sigh of relief. Then, remembering that Hermione was still locked in the train, he Apparated the door of her compartment and unlocked it, calling out to her in his normal voice, “It’s safe now, Hermione, you can get off the train.”

Hermione immediately rushed over to Harry and hugged him in relief. “Harry! I was so worried,” she cried. “Are you alright?” Then she saw the prone body of Bellatrix Lestrange. She wore no mask. Her face was frozen in fear – eyes wide open. “Harry, she looks like she’s been hit by the Killing Curse, what happened?”

In her anxiety about Harry, Hermione hadn't noticed the Headmaster. It was obvious that he'd been talking to Harry. "Excuse me, Professor Dumbledore," she said, "I didn't see you. I'm sorry if I interrupted."

"Not at all, Miss Granger," he said, smiling indulgently at her. "Harry was just telling me how he held off the Death Eaters with the Reflecting Shield that he mastered over the holidays – a most impressive feat. Please continue, Harry."

"I must have held it for five minutes at least," said Harry. "But towards the end, it was a real struggle. The funny thing is, not one of the Death Eaters twigged to the fact that it was their own curses hitting them. They thought all the curses were coming from me. Bellatrix Lestrange got quite a shock when her own Cruciatus Curse hit her. She thought it was mine. But, by then, I was barely able to hold the Reflecting Shield – it takes so much energy. When she finally threw the Killing Curse at me, I really didn't think I had the energy to stop it. I only just managed, before collapsing."

"Well done, Harry," said Dumbledore. "This Reflecting Shield that Rick taught you is the only thing I have ever known to stop a Killing Curse – except, of course, for the protection that your mother used to save you as a baby. It is a formidable weapon, Harry – I suggest we keep quiet about it. Let people think what they will about how Bellatrix Lestrange died. If you had, in fact, used a Killing Curse in self-defence, there would be no blame attached."

"Sirius' death is avenged," said Harry solemnly, staring sadly at the lifeless form of Bellatrix Lestrange. But Harry was not rejoicing. Inwardly he felt shaken at having caused the death of another person – even a totally evil one, like Bellatrix Lestrange.

"It is poetic justice," said Dumbledore. "She died by her own evil curse. Yet you can feel that you contributed, without feeling that you are a killer. You have avenged his death, without having to kill. I think Sirius would be very happy, on both counts."

“By your leave Headmaster,” said the voice of the ghost, emanating eerily, without warning, “I think these Death Eaters deserve a good Squibbing, to ensure that they do not attack innocent students again.”

“By all means, please proceed,” agreed Dumbledore. “It’s a most appropriate and efficacious punishment,” he added, leaving Harry and Hermione, and making his way over to the jinxed Death Eaters.

“Hermione, do you know what happened to Rick?” asked Harry. “I didn’t see him anywhere during the fight with the Death Eaters. I was desperate for him to come and help me – especially when I felt my Reflecting Shield starting to fail. I really thought I was a goner.”

“Umm ... I think he must have Apparated to get the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor,” lied Hermione. Well, it wasn’t a complete lie, she thought to herself – it was true in a way.

“You mean Rick can summon the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor?” asked Harry, incredulously.

“Err, yes,” said Hermione. “He told me one time that he can channel him.” Well that at least is true, she thought to herself. He did say it after all, even if he was lying.

“Well, that’s lucky,” said Harry. “The ghost got here just in the nick of time. I collapsed just after Bellatrix Lestrange Avada Kedavra-ed herself. Holding the Reflecting Shield for so long – and seeing off two Unforgivables – it drained me completely. There were still over a dozen Death Eaters waiting to finish me off – or take me to Voldemort. It seems like the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor has saved the day again!” Just as Harry said that, the rasping voice of the ghost, itself, rang out loud and intimidating, along the length of the station.

“Death Eaters, you shall now be punished for this attack. Let this be a warning to every Death Eater, that they can no longer attack the innocent with impunity. I, the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor, shall exact a terrible punishment upon them – I shall Squib them – as I now Squib you – Squibbus!”

The Death Eaters' wands drifted down to them, but they couldn't catch them. In fact they couldn't move; they were still under the Impediment Jinx.

"Oops, how silly of me," chortled the ghost. "Finite Incantatem. Sorry chaps, but that's just to end the Impediment Jinx. It won't, of course, end the Squibbus Curse, that spell is permanent."

The Death Eaters immediately grabbed their wands and tried to Apparate away, but without success. They tried all kinds of spells, finally giving up, utterly dejected.

"Yes, it is rather nasty, isn't it?" said the ghost, sounding extremely satisfied with itself. "Do be sure to let your Death Eater friends know the terrible fate that awaits them – if they do not repent and mend their ways. Luckily for you, you're at a train station and if I'm not mistaken, the Hogwarts Express is about to depart. So you'll get home at least."

"Please be kind enough to take the body of your former colleague with you," said Professor Dumbledore, pointing to the prone, black-robed figure of Bellatrix Lestrange, lying on the platform.

He then turned his attention to the students. The Hogwarts professors had Ennervated all the stunned students, who were unsteadily getting to their feet. Only three students were unable to walk to the horseless carriages. Professor Flitwick had cast a Mobilicorpus spell on them, and was levitating all three of them to the nearest carriage.

Rick waited until the platform was almost empty before making himself visible. The Hogwarts Express had departed with the Death Eaters aboard. Only Professor Dumbledore remained – waiting to have words with him, Rick guessed, grimly. He was feeling completely ashamed of himself and was really not looking forward to facing the Headmaster. But he would have to do it sooner or later – I might as well get it over with, he thought.

"Err, Professor Dumbledore," said Rick apologetically. "I'm really sorry I let you down like that. I feel terribly ashamed of myself."

“But what happened, Rick? Where on earth were you when the Death Eaters attacked?”

“Err ... on the train, sir,” said Rick, looking sheepishly at his feet and wishing that a hole would open up and swallow him.

“Yes, but why didn’t you Apparate onto the platform in your Ghost of Godric Gryffindor guise, and deal with the Death Eaters immediately?” asked the Headmaster, baffled.

“Err, because I didn’t actually notice them, sir. I didn’t realise there was an attack for quite a while,” said Rick, quietly, hanging his head.

“But why not?” asked Dumbledore, completely mystified now. “How on earth could you not have noticed?”

“Well, sir, you see, err ...” started Rick. “You see, sir, I was a little distracted at the time....”

“Yes?” asked Dumbledore, waiting expectantly.

“I was, err, I was ... well, you see, I was kissing Hermione, sir,” he finally managed to blurt out. “I know it sounds stupid,” he continued quickly, trying to explain himself, “but when we kiss, something very strange happens. It’s like I’m no longer there, like I go somewhere else. I have no idea at all what is happening around me.”

“There is something most unusual about your link with Miss Granger. It seems that your feelings for her somehow connect you with something greater than the both of you, it is most interesting.”

“Do you think I should end our relationship, Professor?” asked Rick, determinedly. “It seems to be distracting me from the work I was sent here to do. It’s happened before, but never with such drastic and potentially disastrous consequences as today. My feelings for Hermione impelled me to risk my life – and so much more, when I went to rescue her at Azkaban. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Rick, I do not believe that you need to end your relationship with Miss Granger. A link has been forged between the two of you, which

cannot easily be broken. If you were to attempt to end the relationship, you would still be distracted, perhaps even more so. You would still feel compelled to rescue her if she was in danger. I doubt it would help,” he said, smiling at Rick.

“But then what can I do?” asked Rick, desperately. “Harry nearly lost his life today because of me. He held off all those Death Eaters with his Reflecting Shield for five minutes or more. It completely exhausted his energy. I arrived just in time. He had collapsed, completely vulnerable, at the mercy of a dozen or more Death Eaters. It was such a close call!”

“Yes, it certainly was a near thing,” agreed Dumbledore. “But whether it was luck or ... who knows what, it turned out well, in the end. There were no lasting injuries. Harry proved – to himself – that he has the power to face his enemies and win. You deserve some of the credit for that. Not only for teaching him to deploy the Reflecting Shield, but also, if I am not mistaken, for somehow increasing his magical power. It is quite extraordinary that he could hold a shield like that for so long – and that he stopped the Killing Curse. Also, Harry has, I believe, finally laid to rest the painful feelings that have been tormenting him since the death of Sirius Black. All-in-all, it has worked out rather well.”

“Thank you, Professor,” said Rick. “That makes me feel a lot better, but I’m going to have to learn to stay focused. That’s two attacks by Voldemort in the past couple of weeks. It seems like he’s going on the offensive.”

“Yes, I believe you are correct. Although we were lucky today, you are going to have to stay focused on what you are here for, Rick,” said the Headmaster looking at him seriously. “Since you have discovered just how distracting Miss Granger can be, may I suggest that you take care to only engage in ... distracting activities, when Harry is safe, and all is secure. Perhaps I should arrange to have Alastor Moody give you some private tutoring in the art of Constant Vigilance?” suggested Dumbledore, his blue eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Err, thank you very much, sir,” said Rick quickly. “But I don’t think that will be necessary. I think I’ve learned my lesson today. I’m going to try very hard to keep my mind focused from now on.”

“Yes, I’m sure you will, Rick,” said Dumbledore smiling at him.

With the start of the new term, Harry and Hermione began their Animagus training with Rick in earnest. They met almost every other evening in the Room of Requirement, which was doing a very convincing imitation of a forest for them. It reminded Harry of the classroom where he’d had his Divination lessons with Firenze the previous year.

The room seemed unbelievably immense; the floor was grassy, with trees growing everywhere. Looking upwards, all you could see were tree branches and leaves. There were several small clearings, connected by dirt paths. One led to a small waterfall cascading down into a beautiful rock pool – which was surrounded by boulders, ideal for sitting on and gazing into the tranquil waters. They spent most of their time around the pool. It was an enchanted place. The soothing sound of the water, somehow seemed to draw them closer to nature, and, perhaps, to their inner animal.

Although Rick was supposed to be doing the training, it was, in fact, Hermione who, having read every book on the subject, determined how they should proceed. “Most of the books recommend starting with exercises involving altering the body through visualisation,” she said. “You need to start with something simple, like lengthening and shortening a finger.” Rick guided them through the visualisation process.

Harry mastered it quickly. Rick wondered whether Harry was a Metamorphmagus, like himself, and made a note to investigate the possibility with Harry later. Harry was a natural. Soon he was able to make all his fingers and toes grow and shrink at will.

Hermione was alarmed that Harry was getting ahead of her. She was determined not to let him beat her at mastering the Animagus

transformation. She felt disgraced every time Rick got a better mark than her in class – there was no way she was going to let Harry beat her at this! Her competitive nature spurred her on, and very soon Hermione caught up with Harry. They went on to changing the length of their arms and legs. They looked so ridiculous at times that it was hard to remain serious. When they started on their faces and necks, it became impossible. They would collapse in hysterics at Harry, with ears as large as an African elephant's, or Hermione, with a four-foot long neck, looking like a giraffe having a bad day.

"We're making really good progress," said Hermione, happily one evening. "We just need to be able to do these body transformation exercises a bit more quickly, and we'll be finished with that part of the training."

"So what's next?" asked Harry.

"Developing an empathy with our animal," answered Hermione. "The books talk about bonding with it. I mean, if your animal was a cat for instance, you'd get yourself a pet cat and spend lots of time with it, trying to understand it; how it thinks and feels."

"Hermione," said Harry, "where am I going to find a pet Golden Eagle?"

"I might be able to help you there," said Rick, closing his eyes and trying to visualise the Animagus forms of some of the great spirits to whom he was linked. "I can't do an eagle, but I can do you a Peregrine Falcon." With that, Rick transformed into one. He spread his wings and began to fly about beneath the tree tops.

Harry tentatively held out his right arm. The falcon glided down and landed gently on his wrist. It was a powerful, fierce-looking bird, and although Harry knew that it was really Rick, he found its proximity to his face quite intimidating. Harry observed closely as the falcon slowly spread its wings and stretched them. He studied how it took off; how it moved its wings to gain height; how it held them out rigidly as it glided; and how it moved them, to stall itself as it landed on his arm. Harry found it easy to let his mind become absorbed in the falcon – it fascinated him. He examined every part of its body

minutely, from the cruel beak to the powerful claws. It was a very impressive bird, and it filled him with awe and longing – longing to transform into a Golden Eagle....

“What about me?” Hermione asked Rick. The two of them were sitting alone in the common room after returning to Gryffindor Tower just before the night time curfew. Hermione was concerned that Harry was going to beat her. She felt Rick had given him an unfair advantage.

“I’ll come visit you in your dormitory tonight,” he said with a grin.

“What?” squeaked Hermione. “Don’t you dare!”

“Of course, I was planning on turning into a fox first,” laughed Rick.

“You mean you can turn into a fox, just like my Animagus form?” asked Hermione, excitedly.

“I haven’t tried yet, but I’ve seen it in my mind – so I’m sure I can.”

“Don’t you think it might look just a little odd, Rick? I mean, a fox coming out of your dormitory and going into mine?” asked Hermione sarcastically.

“No, no. That’s not what I had in mind,” said Rick. “I was planning to Apparate from my dormitory to yours – invisibly, of course. Then I’ll hop on your bed and transform into a fox.”

“Rick Godfry!” said Hermione, outraged. “Don’t you dare Apparate into my dormitory – ever! One of us might be getting undressed.” Hermione turned on Rick and stared at him hard. “Rick, have you ever Apparated into my dormitory?”

“No,” said Rick. “Never! I promise.”

“What about other girls’ dormitories?” asked Hermione suspiciously.

“Look, Hermione,” whispered Rick. “I’ve been spying for Dumbledore all year, OK? I’ve been in the dormitories of the senior Slytherin girls

sometimes, but not often; and I certainly don't stay around if they're undressing – believe me. Most of my spying has been on Draco Malfoy, although since his father got Squibbed, he's been keeping his nose clean. The only time I accidentally came across a female undressing was one time when I Apparated into Umbridge's room – but believe me, I was out of there like greased lightning – Umbridge in her knickers – it should be classified as an Unforgivable!"

Hermione laughed at the image of Rick's encounter with Umbridge.

"What I thought we could do," said Rick becoming serious, "is for you to summon me, once your dorm-mates are asleep. I may not be able to come immediately. I'll have to wait until the guys in my dormitory are asleep as well. I'll Apparate directly to your bed – and immediately turn into a fox. I can sleep on your bed. Just make sure you draw the hangings."

"Umm, Rick," said Hermione. "I'm not sure if this is such a good idea. Boys aren't allowed in the girls' dormitories. I mean you could get expelled if you were caught."

"Hermione, they don't expel foxes – now stop worrying!"

"I don't know Rick; I don't like breaking the rules. I'm a prefect, after all, and, umm ... I'd feel a bit guilty about having you spend the night in my bed. Umm ... are you a male fox, do you know?"

"Umm ... I don't know, actually – does it matter? Hey, I know," laughed Rick, "you can check, tonight!"

"Rick!" giggled Hermione, swatting him on the arm. "You're terrible! I'm pretty sure your Animagus form is the same gender as you. Err ... unless, you're gay – in which case it can be either."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I'm not gay," said Rick, grinning at Hermione. "But some of my Animagus forms are from the spirits of great witches, so some of them are likely to be female. For all you know, I might be a cute little vixen – the perfect mascot for a girls' dormitory. Just think of me as a fur toy to cuddle up to when you go to sleep. You know, with the link between us, it's bound to accelerate your progress."

Rick's final comment did it. Hermione was desperate to succeed in becoming an Animagus. This was more important than school rules – and maybe she'd still beat Harry! "OK," she finally agreed. "But make sure you don't come until I summon you – and transform immediately! OK?"

Hermione lay nervously in her bed waiting for Rick to appear. She had just summoned him. Suddenly she felt something heavy at the end of her bed – she quickly pulled her legs up. "Lumos," she whispered. Hermione was surprised at the size of the fox, she hadn't realised that it would be so large. Tentatively, the fox crawled on its belly up towards the head of the bed. Hermione found it a little frightening. She knew it was Rick, but it was still a fox – a wild animal, a cunning predator, not some docile house pet. But the beauty of the animal captivated her. It looked a bit like a dog, with a pointed muzzle and a bushy, white-tipped tail. Its thick coat was an attractive reddish-brown colour, and the light of her wand reflected the curiosity in both of their eyes.

Hermione timidly reached out a hand and ran it gently along the fox's side. It snuggled closer to her – obviously it like being petted. Hermione loved the feel of its thick fur. She loved patting it and caressing it – and it was clear that the fox was enjoying the attention. Hermione felt a strong attraction to the animal. Is it because it's really Rick and because of our link? Or is it my inner animal feeling attracted to one of its own kind? she wondered. Whatever it was, Hermione really loved the fox, and felt deeply drawn to it. She could feel it gently pulling her, enticing her into its world. Extinguishing her wand light, Hermione wrapped an arm around the fox, and drifted contentedly off to sleep, dreaming she was a fox running wild through the forest.

Hermione, felt something warm and wet against her cheek. Her eyes flew open and she found herself staring into the eyes of the fox, only inches away from her own. The fox was licking her face – it felt nice.

It's almost morning, she thought. This must be how foxes say goodbye. Rick momentarily reverted to his human form before Disapparating from her bed. Hermione nervously checked that the hangings around her bed were completely closed – the last thing she needed was for Parvati or Lavender to see Rick in her bed!

Much as Hermione loved having Rick – the fox – in her bed, it made her feel nervous and guilty. Fortunately, he only needed to spend two more nights snuggled up to her in his fox form. On Friday evening, Harry and Hermione were again working on their Animagus transformations with Rick in the Room of Requirement, when Hermione suddenly turned into a fox. Harry gasped in surprise. He was the only one able to gasp – as Hermione and Rick were both foxes.

Harry had no trouble telling the foxes apart. Hermione was noticeably smaller than Rick. Harry guessed that female foxes were smaller than the males, and that Rick was a male fox, after all. But there was an easier way of distinguishing Hermione. Foxes normally had quite a bit of fur on their faces. But Hermione's head was positively bushy, especially between her eyes and ears. Rick and Hermione seemed to be having a great time playing in the underbrush. One minute Rick was chasing after Hermione, then the next, Hermione was giving chase, and Rick was fleeing before her.

Eventually, the male fox changed back into an exhausted, puffing Rick. "Hey mate," he said with difficulty, to Harry as he tried to catch his breath, "so what do you think of our cute little vixen?"

"There's no doubt at all that it's Hermione," laughed Harry. "Did you notice all the bushy fur on her head?" But Harry stopped laughing, because the fox had just sunk its teeth into his ankle. "Ouch!" yelled Harry. "Cut it out Hermione, those teeth are razor sharp! Go take your carnivorous cravings elsewhere – or it'll be payback time when I transform into an eagle!"

Hermione transformed back into herself. She was so excited, she couldn't stay still. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry, I just got a bit carried away

when you said my face was furry – I didn't realize how sharp my teeth were or that I was hurting you. Let me see that leg. Oh my! It's really bleeding badly, that's a very deep wound. Harry, I'm so sorry! Come on, we'll have to get you to Madam Pomfrey before you bleed to death."

"Calm down Hermione," said Rick. "I err ... I think I may be able to fix Harry's leg." Rick remembered to use his wand – there'd be fewer questions from Harry that way. He waved it at Harry's leg and it was instantly healed – without so much as a scratch on it. "There Harry, all better. We'll just have to hope that Hermione doesn't have rabies," he added with a snide grin, hoping to distract Harry from what he'd just done.

"Yeah," laughed Harry. "Thanks Rick, nice work – Madam Pomfrey couldn't have done it any better. So you can heal as well! Is there any magic that you can't do? I don't suppose there's much point in me asking you again, where all your magical knowledge and power comes from – you won't tell me, will you?" asked Harry in frustration. Rick just shook his head, smiling apologetically.

Hermione, meanwhile, had just turned back into a fox. Excited as she was at finally attaining her Animagus form – and beating Harry – she still had work to do. The books advised practicing the transformation until one could do it instantly. Hermione, as always, was aiming for perfection.

"Who would have guessed that beneath the prim and proper exterior of Hogwarts' Alpha bookworm, there's been a foxy lady just waiting to burst out?" laughed Rick, making sure that Hermione was out of earshot. He didn't want to have his leg gnawed off.

"So what about me, Rick?" asked Harry, grinning at Rick's joke. "Do you think I'll need much longer?"

"No, you're close, mate," said Rick. "I've got an idea to help you along. What if I transform into a Peregrine Falcon sometime, while you hop on your broom. We can go flying together. I'll stay just in front of you. That way, you'll be able to watch me fly, and maybe absorb the

feeling. I think that's what helped Hermione so much. She was able to pick up on my feelings when I was a fox."

"So is that where you've been the past few nights?" asked Harry, with a grin. "I noticed you weren't in your bed. So whose bed were you in then? Hermione's perhaps?"

"Err, yeah No! Err ... what I mean is that I was in her bed – No! Not in her bed – on her bed! But I was a fox – the whole time – honest Harry! And it was just to help her with her Animagus transformation, of course."

"Of course," grinned Harry. "Relax, Rick, I believe you – and anyway, I'm not a prefect – like Ron! Luckily for you, I don't think Ron noticed you missing – he sleeps like a log."

"Please don't tell him, mate," begged Rick. "He might not understand. And it might be best not to let on to Hermione that you know, either. She'd be really embarrassed."

"No worries mate, I'll keep quiet," laughed Harry. "But you do realise that you don't have any excuses to be out of your bed at night anymore, don't you?"

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 18 - The Healer

It was fortunate, indeed, that Hermione had mastered the Animagus transformation, and that Rick was again sleeping in his own bed, at nights. On the very night that Hermione first succeeded with her Animagus transformation, Harry had his first nightmare, in over half a year.

Rick was at Harry's side almost immediately and placed a Silencing Charm around Harry's bed so as not to disturb – or be disturbed by – the other boys in the dormitory. Harry was screaming fitfully – he was obviously witnessing something terrible. Rick probed Harry's mind and entered his nightmare. It was a Death Eater attack. Rick recognised the house; he had been there only recently. Fear gripped his heart as he recognised the people being attacked – they were Hermione's parents. He quickly made himself invisible and Apparated to the Grangers' house.

Rick was horrified by the scene he found in the Granger's living room. Hermione's parents were writhing violently on the floor from the excruciating pain of the Cruciatus Curse. Rick immediately levitated the wands from the hands of the two Death Eaters, breaking the curse they were holding the Grangers under. Rick only hoped he was not too late. It was obvious that the Death Eaters had kept them under the curse for a long time – and that their intention was not just to torture them, but to destroy their minds – just as Death Eaters had done to Neville Longbottom's unfortunate parents. This was Voldemort's revenge upon Hermione for escaping from Azkaban, and then eluding capture at Hogsmeade. Her Muggle parents were easy targets. What better way to make her suffer?

"Squibbus," said Rick in a rasping ghostly voice. He didn't have time to waste with these Death Eaters. "I am the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor and I have just turned you both into Squibs – now, get out of here – and fast – before I subject you both to the same evil curse you have just been casting!"

When the Death Eaters regained their wands, which had floated back down to them, they attempted to Apparate away from the ghost, but nothing happened.

“You are Squibs – you cannot Apparate. You cannot do magic – ever again. Now run for your miserable lives!”

The Death Eaters did exactly that, and were out the door and gone. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were lying unconscious on the floor. Rick saw that they were at least breathing. He wondered what he should do with them. Take them to St. Mungo’s? No, it wouldn’t be safe. They’ll be easy prey for Death Eaters there. Does St. Mungo’s even take Muggles? wondered Rick. No, I’ll have to take them to Hogwarts, to the Hospital Wing, he decided.

Rick held their hands and Apparated them to the Hogwarts gates. Then he conjured stretchers, and used the Mobilicorpus Spell to float them to the castle. Rick remained invisible. If he encountered anyone, he would pretend to be the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. He got the Grangers to the hospital wing and managed to rouse Madam Pomfrey.

“Good nurse,” he said in his ghostly voice. “These are the parents of Miss Hermione Granger. They have been subjected to the Cruciatus Curse. Please see what you can do for them. I shall inform the Headmaster.” With that, Rick Apparated to the Headmaster’s study and quickly explained what had happened.

Professor Dumbledore was immediately alert. “Yes, after his recent failed attempts to get at Harry, I have been expecting renewed attacks from Voldemort. It had not occurred to me that Miss Granger’s parents might be targeted – but perhaps it should have. Unfortunately, there are far too many soft targets available to Voldemort – and far too few of us in the Order to protect them all,” said Dumbledore in frustration. “I shall go immediately to the Hospital Wing and ensure that everything possible is being done for Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I shall also inform Miss Granger. Rick, please go back to your dormitory, and stay with Harry. Make sure he is alright. If necessary, please bring him to the Hospital Wing.”

When Rick Apparated to his dormitory, there was no noise coming from Harry's bed; there was just the usual cacophony of his dorm-mates' snores. But then he realised that he hadn't lifted the Silencing Charm that he'd placed around Harry's bed. Rick pushed his head through the hangings, to see that Harry was wide awake. Rick sat next to him.

"Hermione's parents," began Harry, terribly distressed. "Death Eaters put them under the Cruciatus —"

"I know," said Rick. "I ... err, I heard you screaming about it, and so I summoned the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. He went to help them, and brought them back here to Hogwarts; they're in the Hospital Wing."

"Did he get there in time to save them, or are they ... like Neville's parents?" asked Harry fearfully.

"I don't know," said Rick, sadly shaking his head, not wanting to contemplate what the future might hold for them. "Umm, did you have any other dreams?"

"No," said Harry shaking his head. "And I really don't want to have any more dreams like that...."

"Well, I don't know if you get to have a choice, mate," said Rick sympathetically. "I know it must be horrible for you, having to witness such things – but it provides indispensable intelligence. I mean, your dream may have saved Hermione's parents; and if there are more attacks, I might be able to alert the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor in time to save some of the people."

"Dumbledore said he's been expecting something like this," added Rick. "The Death Eaters have been quiet for months now. Voldemort must be getting frustrated at his failure to capture you – twice – over the Christmas holidays. Plus, Dumbledore's back in control of Hogwarts now, which means that Voldemort can't touch you here. Things had been going all Voldemort's way. These are the first setbacks he's had for a long time. Maybe he's just angry and letting off steam – I sure hope it's not the start of all-out war."

“Yeah,” said Harry yawning and closing his eyes. Rick decided to stay with Harry a while ... just in case. Just as Rick felt himself starting to nod off, there was a sudden gasp from Harry. He was dreaming again, and he looked very agitated. He began tossing his head from side-to-side, clutching at his scar with both hands. Rick probed Harry’s mind, again entering his nightmare. It was another Death Eater attack, but this time it was a big one – involving many Death Eaters. Rick focused hard, trying to locate the scene of the attack. He saw a sign reading Stournmouth, and he could hear people screaming in fear. Rick concentrated hard on the location as he experienced it through Harry’s mind. He made himself invisible, before Apparating.

Rick found himself on a beach. Stournmouth was a small coastal settlement of a few hundred families. It was inhabited by a mixture of wizards, witches, Squibs and Muggles. There were no Pureblood wizarding families here. Nor were there many purely Muggle families either. They were a happy mixture, living contentedly together in this isolated, but beautiful coastal village.

But tonight, there was neither happiness nor beauty here. Voldemort had sent his Death Eaters to exterminate the despised Mudbloods, Mixed-bloods, and Squibs. In the morning their bodies would be found littering the beach, hundreds of them; men, women, children, and babies. Not one was to be spared. Voldemort had decided that it was time to begin purifying the wizarding world of such filth – and striking fear into the hearts of any who were foolish enough to oppose him.

Rick saw at once that the Death Eaters were in complete control of the situation. There were at least fifty of them. They had systematically broken into every house and driven the occupants down to the beach where they had them herded together. The witches and wizards amongst them had been easily disarmed. Masked Death Eaters now surrounded them on all sides, gloating and leering at them sadistically. They were enjoying their moment of power, with a whole village helpless before them. The fear was palpable. Frantic parents clung to their screaming children and babies.

The whole gruesome scene was illuminated by an enormous Dark Mark, glowing an eerie green in the sky. It looked like the Death

Eaters were about to begin their killing spree. They raised their wands to deliver the first Killing Curses, but a strange thing happened. Their wands kept rising until they were well out of reach. Next, the giant Dark Mark disappeared with a splutter, like a candle flame being snuffed out. It was replaced by a gentle white glow, which illuminated the beach and everyone on it.

“Impedimenta,” boomed a loud ghostly voice. The Death Eaters stood frozen.

“Good people of Stourmouth,” said the ghostly voice. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor, and I have come to save you from these evil Death Eaters. You are completely safe now – no harm will come to you.

“You Death Eaters, on the other hand, have a great deal to fear. You came here tonight to murder these innocent people – men, women, and children. You came to strike fear into the hearts of all good people in the Wizarding world. Well, the tables are turned. Tonight I shall strike fear into the heart of every Death Eater. They shall know the fate that awaits those who attack the innocent.

“I am sure you have all heard of me – of what happened to your fellow Death Eaters who attacked the Hogwarts students at Hogsmeade station recently. Perhaps you thought that I come only to defend Hogwarts students? Perhaps you thought that I would not move beyond Hogwarts? Be warned – and take my warning to your fellow Death Eaters – and to your evil master. Tell him that I shall defend all good people from him and his lackeys. I shall protect them all, be they wizards, witches, Squibs or Muggles. Wherever he attacks, I shall be there to wreak righteous vengeance against the evildoers. Prepare yourselves for my vengeance, evil ones - Squibbus!

“Finite Incantatum! There, now you can move again. You can have your wands back too, although they won’t be much use to you for anything but firewood. You are all Squibs – for the rest of your lives! Any children, henceforth born to you, will also be Squibs. Now I suggest that you leave – very quickly – you may find that you are not particularly popular in this village.”

When Rick Apparated back to his dormitory, from Stornmouth, he was relieved to find Harry sleeping peacefully. Rick was completely exhausted, and went straight to sleep. The next day was Saturday. Hermione was not at breakfast. Projecting his magical Hogwarts map, Rick discovered her in the Hospital Wing with her parents. They appeared to be in some kind of private room. Rick decided to Apparate to them.

When he appeared, Hermione leapt from her chair and threw her arms around him sobbing. "Rick, it's just awful. They haven't regained consciousness, and Madam Pomfrey says that ... that, there's nothing she can do to help them. She says they were under the Cruciatus Curse for too long – that their minds have gone, just like the Longbottoms. Oh Rick," she howled in grief, "It's just too terrible to believe. I don't want to believe that they'll spend the rest of their lives like ... like, this," she cried, breaking down in his arms.

Rick tried to send comforting feelings towards Hermione, but she was inconsolable. Hermione loved her parents dearly – Voldemort had devised the most heinous punishment imaginable for her. It would have been kinder to have simply killed her parents. In time, perhaps, Hermione might have managed to move on. But there was no moving on from this. And Harry, upon witnessing his friend's grief and pain, would blame himself, and inevitably sink back into the mood of guilt, depression, and isolation that he had been in at the start of the school year. Voldemort had succeeded in achieving maximum damage.

"Rick," begged Hermione, through her tears. "Is there anything you can do? You healed Harry, yesterday, which means that you must have healing powers. I can think of several witches and wizards whose spirits have probably blessed you with their powers. There's Gunhilda of Goorsemoor, Dilys Derwent and Mungo Bonham. And probably Aesculapius and Hippocrates as well – if they were wizards."

Hermione, Rick realised, had forced herself into research mode. He noticed a huge pile of books about famous Healers and magical

healing on a table in the corner of the room. I guess it's a defence mechanism, he thought sadly. It's Hermione's way of distracting her mind from the awful reality of her parents' condition. She can believe, for the moment, that there might be something in one of these books that will heal them.

"Actually, I've been thinking about it since last night, Hermione," said Rick, shaking his head. "But I don't know what I can do. With Harry's leg, I could see his injury. I understood what was wrong, so all I had to do was focus my, err ... healing energy, I guess you could call it, on his injury and it was healed. I didn't need to know how to heal it, but I did need to know what was wrong and where to focus my energy. With your parents, I can't see what's wrong. I just don't know where to start."

"What about using Empathetic Magic," suggested Hermione. "The way witches do with their babies, to find out what's wrong with them. Won't you at least try?"

"Alright," said Rick, sitting on the chair next to Hermione's mother. He took her hand in his and focused his mind and feelings on her. "I'm sorry, Hermione, it's not working," said Rick, shaking his head after several minutes. "I hardly know your parents. There's no connection between us to build upon."

"But I have a connection to them," said Hermione. "Maybe you could try using me as a conduit to connect to them," she said, desperately. "I can sit on your lap and you can wrap your arms around me. If you focus on me, and I focus on my mother, maybe you'll be able connect with her that way – through me."

"OK," said Rick, "let's try it." Hermione sat on his lap, holding her mother's hand, while Rick held her tightly in his arms. They sat that way for almost ten minutes, concentrating hard – so hard in fact, that they didn't notice the door opening, and Professor Snape entering the room.

"What on earth is going on in here?" demanded Snape, taking in the bizarre scene before him.

Hermione sprang instantly from Rick's lap – her face was crimson. "Err ... I can explain professor," she stuttered. "It's not at all what it looks like. We ... err, we weren't ... err, what I mean is that we were trying to...."

"Yes?" said Snape, menacingly. If he had any doubts about what they were up to, their acute embarrassment confirmed his suspicions. "Please do continue, Miss Granger. I am sure there is a perfectly innocent explanation for what you and Mr. Godfry were doing ... carrying on like rabbits in rut, while your parents lie comatose, in a state worse than death. Yes, please do explain...."

"I ... I was just comforting her," said Rick. He definitely didn't want to start discussing what they were really doing. Snape was already suspicious enough of him, without mentioning his healing abilities.

"Comforting her?" repeated Snape, arching his eyebrows. "Yes, I must say that the pair of you looked extremely comfortable. I would hardly think that this was either the time or the place – or indeed the appropriate circumstance – for carrying on ... like a pair of wanton, libidinous teenagers," he added with a look of haughty disdain.

This was too much for Hermione. She was already emotionally overwrought and at breaking point. Snape's snide insinuations pushed her over the edge. "How dare you make such filthy insinuations!" she demanded, as she rounded on Snape, glaring at him in fury. "Do you have any idea at all how I'm feeling right now – with what's happened to my parents? How can you be so beastly and insensitive – to accuse me of ... of, snogging – while my parents lie there like that – their lives destroyed?! Only an evil twisted mind, like yours, could entertain such macabre thoughts. And only a walking corpse like you – without a heart – totally devoid of human feelings and sympathies, could say such things to me, when I'm feeling so utterly devastated. I know you've hated me from my very first Potions class. But I never imagined that you could be this despicable. You've never missed a chance at putting me down. Even now, you just can't resist the evil urge to put the boot in. Get out of this room and leave us alone – you disgusting Death Eater!"

Snape was utterly stunned. His face turned deathly white. No Hogwarts student had ever spoken to him like that – not even in his own miserable student days. In fact, no one had ever spoken to him like that. The Death Eater accusation cut deeply, touching a raw nerve, which could sometimes be hidden, but never healed. He erupted in fury.

“How dare you talk to me like that, Granger?!” he said dangerously. “I don’t care how upset you are about your parents. I don’t care what you and Godfry were or were not doing – don’t you ever talk to me like that again! Don’t you ever mention my past! It is absolutely none of your business. You have no idea at all what I have done in the past – or have had done to me.”

Snape was livid. “Your insolent and disrespectful comments to me will cost you your prefect’s badge. I shall make it clear to the Headmaster that my continued engagement as his Potions master depends upon it,” he said. “I shall also be explaining to him, and your Head of House, that I have deducted two hundred points from Gryffindor, for the grossly inappropriate activity in which you and Godfry were engaged when I entered this room.” Before Hermione could say a word, he turned and swept towards the door, his cloak billowing angrily behind him.

“Professor!” called Rick. Snape turned in the doorway, glaring furiously at Rick. But before Snape could say a word, Rick stared him in the eye, and said “Obliviate.”

The expression on Snape’s face metamorphosised from extreme fury to disorientation and confusion, before finally turning to the usual inscrutable mask. “What are you doing here, Mr. Godfry?” he asked coldly. Rick and Hermione were now standing well apart. Hermione looked nervously at Rick. Verbally abusing a teacher was one thing, but Memory Charming was quite another. Hermione was certain that it meant instant expulsion. She hoped that Rick had got it right, and that Snape wouldn’t realise what had happened.

“Err, I just came to, err ... give Hermione some support,” answered Rick. “She’s very upset about what has happened to her parents.”

"I'm sorry to hear about your parents, Miss Granger, the Headmaster asked me to examine them," said Snape emotionlessly. He entered the room, and silently examined both Mr. and Mrs. Granger, lifting their eyelids and looking into their eyes with clinical interest. "A typical case of the Cruciatus Curse, deliberately applied for too long. Something I have been unfortunate enough to witness ... far too often. I am sorry, Miss Granger, but they will never recover." Then glancing at the pile of healing books on the table, he added, "Many notable Healers have attempted to reverse this particular consequence of the Cruciatus Curse, but without success. I, myself, have searched for a potion to cure it – but again, without success. Unfortunately, I must tell you that nothing can be done for them. They are beyond help." With that, he turned briskly, and exited the room a second time.

Rick cast a locking charm on the door. Hermione was in tears again. After Snape's comments, she had lost all hope. She was too upset to even want to discuss what had happened the first time Snape entered the room, and Rick's audacity in using a Memory Charm to get them out of a very sticky situation. "Hermione, please don't give up!" pleaded Rick. "Just because Snape – the master of gloom and despair – thinks there's no hope, it doesn't mean we have to give up."

"But what can we do, Rick?" asked Hermione, despondently. "What we were doing before Snape came in wasn't working at all. I wasn't able to establish an Empathetic Magic link with my mother. Maybe it's not possible to connect with someone in that state," said Hermione dejectedly. "I'm at my wit's end. Have you got any other ideas?"

"I don't know," said Rick thinking. "We don't know whether it is or isn't possible to connect using Empathetic Magic with your parents in their current state. So we just have to assume that it's possible – it's our only hope. What we do know is that I can't connect to them – either directly, or through you – it just doesn't work."

"So, where does that leave us?" asked Hermione gloomily.

"Maybe it's possible for me to transfer some power to you, so that you can make the connection yourself," said Rick thoughtfully.

"But that's not possible, is it?" asked Hermione sceptically.

"I'm not sure," said Rick slowly. "Maybe it is. Over Christmas, Harry and I spent a lot of time together practicing duelling, and I'm sure that his magical energy really received a big boost – although it wasn't something I set out deliberately to do. Remember how he managed to cast the Reflecting Shield and hold it for so long, even against Unforgivable Curses when the Death Eaters attacked at Hogsmeade station?"

"Yes," said Hermione, uncertainly. "But Harry was already an excellent dueller, and he was already a very powerful wizard. You didn't give him any new powers; you just boosted what he already had. But I've only ever been on the receiving end of Empathetic Magic. I mean, I've studied a great deal about it, but I've never actually used it – I don't really know how."

"Hermione, don't forget that you and I have a special link. If there's anyone I can transfer magical power to, it's you," said Rick encouragingly. "I'm going to try to transfer Empathetic Magic power to you. If it works, then you might be able to connect with your parents, and be able to understand what the problem is. If you can figure out what's stopping them from regaining consciousness, and identify exactly where it's located, then I can try using my healing powers on them. I know it seems like a long shot, but it's the only thing I can think of, that might possibly help them. Are you willing to give it a go?"

"OK," said Hermione, doubtfully. "I think I'm ready to try just about anything at this point. So how are you going to do this power transfer?"

"Err ... let's try embracing," said Rick. "Don't worry, it's alright, no one will get past the lock I've put on that door. Now, try to be receptive, try to absorb the energy you feel coming from me, OK?"

"OK," said Hermione, embracing Rick. Hermione had no idea how long they embraced. Her mind seemed to stop. She felt like she was no longer in the room, in the Hospital Wing – or even in the school. She felt like she was ... nowhere – and yet everywhere. She was no longer even aware of Rick. She became aware of the presence of several beings. Are they spirits? Are they some of the great witches

and wizards who have given Rick his powers? she wondered. Their presence felt benign. One of these spirits approached her. It whispered, "I grant you the power of Empathetic Magic." Then another spirit approached, and a warm kindly voice whispered, "I bless you with healing powers – you shall be a great Healer." All the while, Hermione was aware of waves of warmth flowing through her. Her whole body tingled with the subtle vibrations surrounding her and flowing through her body. She felt every part of her being absorbing the waves of warmth.

Finally it ended. Rick released her. Hermione excitedly told Rick what she had experienced.

"That's odd," said Rick, shaking his head. "I was concentrating on transferring Empathetic Magic power to you the whole time. It never occurred to me to try transferring healing power as well. It's a bit like what happened with Harry. It wasn't really me who was in control. I wasn't really doing anything, I was just the conduit. It looks like the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light decided that you were worthy of greater gifts," said Rick, kissing Hermione.

"I just hope I can help my mother and father, now," said Hermione, coming down from her high, to the desperate reality of her poor parents. She sat down next to her mother, taking her hand and concentrating hard on her face for several minutes. Then she did the same with her father for a few minutes, before returning to her mother.

"It's fear," said Hermione, finally. "The pain from the Cruciatus Curse was unbearable – but the fear it created was even worse. It was fear of the pain that caused them to fall into a coma – fear that the pain would never end. The mind tried to protect itself from this unbearable and overpowering fear, by switching itself off – or more correctly – by hibernating."

"But how did you manage to connect with your parents if their minds are hibernating?" asked Rick, puzzled.

"Not the whole mind is hibernating; there are some localised thoughts and feelings that are still active," explained Hermione. "The problem is that the controlling part of the mind – the part that initiated the

hibernation – and needs to terminate it – is, itself, hibernating. If it stays this way for too long, then the hibernating brain cells will start dying off. Fortunately, that hasn't started happening yet. I know exactly where the controlling part is located. I think I can actually force it to awaken."

"Gosh, I just hope this works," said Rick, cautiously. "But hang on, Hermione. If they regain consciousness, they'll immediately remember being under the Cruciatus Curse – as if it was happening only moments ago. They'll be full of fear and terror. Their minds might even try to hibernate again. Even if they don't, they'll be completely traumatised."

"So, you'll have to Memory Charm them, Rick. You need to do it the instant they regain consciousness, so they don't remember anything about the attack."

"Good idea," said Rick, nodding in agreement. "OK, I'm ready when you are."

Alright, let's try my mother first," said Hermione, placing her hands on either side of her mother's head and concentrating hard. It seemed to Rick that she stayed that way for ages, unmoving, her mind seemingly elsewhere. Then, suddenly her mother's eyes sprang open – they were wide with fear. Rick quickly Obliviated her. Then her eyes closed again.

"What happened?" screamed Hermione. "I thought she was OK, but she's lost consciousness again."

"Relax," said Rick. "I stunned her – err just lightly – after Obliviating her. We don't want her to see your dad, in the state he's in, or what we're about to do to him. She wouldn't understand – she might become hysterical, or try to interfere."

"Clever idea," said Hermione, relieved, as she set to work on her father. It went more quickly this time, as Hermione knew exactly what to do. As soon as Hermione had restored him to consciousness, Rick Obliviated him, then immediately did a Finite Incantatum on Mrs. Granger. Hermione was beside herself with joy, at the sight of her

parents both conscious, once more. She had all but given up hope that she would ever see them like this again.

Hers parents were bewildered and confused as they looked around and took in their surroundings. "Hermione!" said her mother. "Where are we? How did we get here?"

"The last thing I remember, I was sitting in my favourite chair in the lounge, reading," said Mr. Granger, sitting up in his bed. "What on earth has happened to us? Something magical perhaps?" he asked suspiciously.

"Umm, Mum, Dad, please don't worry," said Hermione gently, holding her mother's hand comfortingly. "You were attacked last night, by evil wizards. Rick —"

"Err ... don't you mean the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor, Hermione?" Rick interrupted, looking at her meaningfully.

"Err ... yes, that's right. Anyway, it doesn't matter. You were rescued and brought here to Hogwarts. This is the Hospital Wing. You were both unconscious until just now – I've been so worried, you have no —"

But Hermione was cut off at that point by thumping and banging on the door. Rick nodded his head towards it and it sprang open. Professor Snape, who must have been pushing on it, came stumbling into the room, almost falling to the floor. He didn't immediately look at the beds, but fixed his eyes suspiciously upon Rick.

"What exactly did you do to that door, Godfrey?" he demanded. "How did a sixth year student manage to place a locking charm on it that neither I, nor the Headmaster, could penetrate. Would you care to explain?"

"Professor Dumbledore," shrieked Hermione as she noticed the Headmaster entering the room, behind Snape, his blue eyes twinkling as he took in the sight of her parents, very much recovered, in their beds. "My parents are alright – both of them!"

“Impossible!” exclaimed Snape. But he had to believe his own eyes. Mr. Granger, still attired in his clothes from the previous evening, had swung his legs over the side of the bed, and was looking around for his shoes. “May I?” asked Snape, although it was more of a statement, as he strode over to Mr. Granger, lifting his chin, and staring intently into his eyes. “What is your name?”

Mr. Granger was somewhat taken aback by Snape’s rude behaviour. However, he answered politely, “I’m Bob Granger. This is my wife, Janice and this,” he said, nodding proudly towards Hermione, “is our brilliant daughter, Hermione. There, does it sound like I am in possession of all of my faculties?”

Snape didn’t reply. He just stood there staring at Mr. Granger as if he were some kind of freak – a scientific impossibility.

“Oh, and by the way, I’m a dentist,” added Mr. Granger. Then addressing Snape in a professional voice, he added, “Look, I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but I always look at people’s teeth when I first meet them – it’s an occupational habit, you might say. Err, nothing personal, old chap, but I couldn’t help noticing that yours are in desperate need of attention. Since you appear to be one of my daughter’s teachers, I’d be more than happy to offer you a free check-up. I’m sure I could get those teeth of yours cleaned up quite nicely – I’ve never seen such yellow specimens in all my professional life. Janice, dear, you must take a look at this poor chap’s teeth, they’re really quite, err ... unique.... Actually, I might get a picture or two for a research paper that I’m writing, while I’m about it. Some before and after shots – if you see what mean?”

“No thank you,” spat Snape, with arrogant ire. “I have absolutely no desire to place any part of my body in the hands of barbaric Muggle medical or dental hacks.” He turned his back on the Grangers, ignoring them as one might ignore house-elves, servants, or other inferiors. “Headmaster, I can find no explanation for their remarkable recovery. I examined them myself, not half an hour ago. As you know, I have been unfortunate enough to have examined others in the same state. Recovery is utterly unheard of. Perhaps Miss Granger – or, more to the point, Mr. Godfry – would care to tell us exactly what happened,” he said, turning a hard interrogating glare upon Rick.

"Now, now, Severus," said Professor Dumbledore. "There will be time for questions later. I, for one, am more concerned to find out how our guests are feeling and to offer them Hogwarts' hospitality. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, welcome to Hogwarts. May I offer you some refreshments?" This had the desired effect of inducing Snape to leave the room, muttering something about checking up on some potion he was brewing.

Professor Dumbledore summoned up tea and scones for the Grangers, and made them feel welcome. After ascertaining that they were sufficiently recovered from their ordeal, he ventured on to a more serious subject. "It is my unfortunate duty, to have to inform you, that it is not safe for you to return to your home and your former lives. The evil wizards who attacked you last night would most certainly return."

"But what can we do?" asked Mr. Granger.

"Fortunately, those who perpetrated last night's attack, think that you are both in a permanent coma, from which you will never recover. Your recovery is, in fact, quite remarkable," added the Headmaster, looking meaningfully at Rick. "That is why Professor Snape was so surprised to find you conscious when we entered the room. We can use our enemies' ignorance of your recovery to our advantage. You will have to start a new life, preferably somewhere distant. Until our enemies are defeated, you will need to remain there, and Hermione will have to pretend that you are in a hospital, somewhere, in a permanent coma. It is the only way to protect you and keep you safe."

"Why don't we just bring our retirement plans forward a few years, Bob?" Mrs. Granger asked her husband. Then turning to Professor Dumbledore, she explained, "We were planning to give up our practice in a year or two, and retire to the Greek Islands. We even have a spot picked out. Of course, it's not really retirement. We both want to devote ourselves to writing and reviewing academic papers. To be honest, we're both getting a little tired of our practice; this will give us an excuse to give it up a little sooner."

“That sounds perfect,” said Dumbledore, happily. “I have colleagues who will help you get everything organised and get you off to your Greek island without anyone knowing a thing about it. Please leave it up to me, I shall arrange everything. Now if you will excuse me, I need to have a conversation with Mr. Godfrey. I’ll be back a little later to get you started on your new life.”

Hermione found it difficult maintaining the charade that her parents were in a permanent coma, but for the sake of their safety, she had no choice. There were children of known or suspected Death Eaters at Hogwarts who might be asked by their parents about her behaviour, so she had to maintain a public demeanour of sadness and loss.

It was particularly difficult dealing with the well-intended sympathy of her friends. Hardest of all to deal with were Neville’s sincere attempts at commiseration. At last he felt there was someone he could open up to, who understood how it felt. Hermione felt very sympathetic towards Neville, but she also felt deceitful and hypocritical. Eventually, she let it be known that she preferred not to discuss her parents. To others, it just looked like she was bottling it all up. Harry was the only one who had been told the truth – although not the details of how Hermione’s parents had been healed. Professor Dumbledore did not want Harry blaming himself for a tragedy which was in fact a sham.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 19 - Hogwarts Destroyed

On a crisp, sunny, Saturday morning in February, Harry and Rick walked down to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Ducking behind a large oak, Rick transformed into a majestic Peregrine Falcon, and immediately took flight. It was the first time he'd flown outside the Room of Requirement and he loved it. The feel of the wind enveloping him and lifting him, cushioning him and supporting him was amazing. The sense of freedom was breathtaking. Of course, he'd flown in his dragon form, but flying as a falcon was completely different; it was unbelievably exhilarating. In fact, Rick became so carried away with the excitement of flying, that he forgot all about Harry. When he finally remembered, he looked down to see Harry speeding towards him on his Firebolt. Rick circled for a while, waiting for Harry. When he eventually caught up, Rick came down gently on the end of Harry's broom.

"Wow!" said Harry in admiration. "It's amazing watching you fly. I can't wait to fly like that. OK, so the plan was that you're going to fly a bit ahead of me, and I'll concentrate on observing you and try to absorb some of the feeling. I'll tell you what, this isn't just going to be good Animagus training – it'll also double as Quidditch practice – having to turn and dive and try to keep up with you on my broom."

The falcon lifted off from Harry's broom and went into a steep dive. It took all of Harry's prodigious flying skills to keep up, as it twisted and turned, this way and that. It was easy enough staying up with the falcon when it was gaining altitude or flying level, but there was no way Harry could stay with it in a dive.

Rick had decided to keep roughly to the boundary of the Forbidden Forest, as he didn't want to risk taking Harry beyond the Hogwarts' Wards. They were far enough away from the castle, that only Harry would be visible. It would look, to an observer in the castle, like Harry was out for an early Saturday morning workout on his broom.

Coming out of a particularly steep dive, and levelling out only a few feet from the ground, Rick looked about for Harry. But, there was no sign of him, anywhere. Rick looked all along the edge of the forest as he beat his wings hard, quickly gaining altitude, but still he couldn't

see Harry anywhere. Rick was starting to worry. He was right behind me when I went into that dive. Why would he fly off, rather than follow me? Where can he possibly be?

Rick wished he had an Empathetic Magic link with Harry, so he could sense the direction he'd taken. He'd have to take a gamble and choose a likely direction. If this was some hostile abduction attempt, then they would try to take Harry beyond the Ward line. But how could anyone have gotten over the Ward line in the first place? Rick wondered, as he flew quickly out over the Forbidden Forest. What's that, down there? he asked himself, as he spotted something moving low over the tree tops. Rick dived towards it, gaining speed. As he drew closer he recognised Harry on his Firebolt. It had been hard to spot him, because he was flying so close to the trees. But what on earth does he think he's up to? Rick wondered, flying straight towards Harry.

Rick finally caught up with Harry, and came down on the end of his broom handle. Harry's face was filled with fear. "Something's pulling me, Rick. It's not just the broom, it's me as well. I've got no control at all. One minute I was diving after you, the next, I was being pulled out over the Forbidden Forest, skimming the tree tops. I feel like I'm being pulled by some bloody gigantic magnet. What can we do?" asked Harry, sounding worried and frightened.

Rick wondered if he should try transforming into a dragon. Would he be able to stop Harry's movement if he grabbed him with his claws? Would he harm him if he tried? Rick's thoughts were interrupted by Harry yelling at him. "Look, Rick! In front of us! What's that?"

Ahead of them was a foreboding black cloud, and they were heading straight into its menacing centre. "Get off the broom, Rick! Quick!" yelled Harry desperately. "That cloud means death, I'm sure of it. I don't want you to die with me! Please, Rick, let go of my broom! You don't have to die with me!"

There was no time to transform, but Rick was determined not to abandon Harry to whatever fate lay before him. He gripped Harry's broom tighter as they plunged into the depths of the black cloud.

Everything went black for a brief moment, and then they were out of it, still flying above the tree tops.

“Why didn’t you let go like I told you?” demanded Harry. He looked about warily, taking in the surroundings. They were still flying over the forest, but it looked different, somehow – greener – and the air seemed warmer. “I don’t know what that cloud was all about, but I still can’t control myself or my broom,” he said. “Hey! What’s happening? I’m turning around! We’re heading back towards Hogwarts. What the hell is going on?”

Rick was feeling very apprehensive. He clung tightly to Harry’s broom; he wasn’t going to risk separation again. He too, had noticed that the forest seemed greener and the air warmer, but he couldn’t understand why. As they continued hurtling above the tree tops, Rick was relieved to see the castle on the horizon. But as they drew closer, he noticed that it didn’t look quite right, something was different. He wondered whether it was just his falcon’s eyes perceiving things differently from his human eyes. Harry didn’t appear to have noticed the castle yet. Of course! Even his keen Seeker’s eyes were no match for a falcon’s, Rick realised.

Harry finally spotted the castle. “Hey Rick, I can see the lake and Hogwarts, we’re nearly there.” But then he too, noticed that the castle looked different – but what was it? As they drew nearer he realised. “Rick! Look at the castle! It’s all in ruins! It looks like it’s been destroyed!” he cried despairingly. “What could have happened? We’ve only been gone twenty minutes. How could it have been destroyed in that time?” The falcon just shook its head from side to side. Obviously Rick had no idea either.

“Rick?” asked Harry. “Do you think maybe that black cloud back there put the Squibbus Curse on us? No, not that ... what I mean,” said Harry uncertainly, “is that maybe it turned us into Muggles. Squibs, like Filch, can see the castle, but Muggles can’t. To them it just looks like a ruin ... exactly the way it looks to me right now. Rick, does it look like a ruin to you too?”

The falcon gave a distinct nod. “Then that probably means you’ve turned into a real Peregrine Falcon and you’ll never be able to

change back. Voldemort has eliminated both of us! What other explanation can there be?" asked Harry, feeling utterly dejected. "Hey, we're starting to go down; we seem to be heading for the other side of the lake. The whole place looks deserted." At first Harry couldn't see any sign of life. But as they came closer to the ground, Harry noticed a solitary figure by the lake: tall, thin and dressed in a black robe – Voldemort!

They came down no more than ten feet away from the evil black-hooded wizard, who was standing, with arms crossed. As he struggled to stay on his feet, Harry looked into that terrible snakelike face – a face he had hoped never to see again. A violent chill passed through his body, but strangely, his scar caused him no pain at all. The scarlet, slit-pupilled eyes were glaring hatefully from that gaunt, white skeletal face. But they weren't glaring at him.

"Dumbledore!" sneered the black-robed magician contemptuously. "So you're an Animagus. Who would have thought you would be a falcon Animagus. A Dodo would be more appropriate for a senile old fool like you!" said Voldemort derisively, in a high, cold voice.

Harry tried to conceal his surprise, at what appeared to be Albus Dumbledore, standing beside him. He knew it was Rick. Obviously he was attempting to disguise himself – and it was a very convincing disguise. Had he not been so overwhelmed with fear and hatred, Harry might have marvelled at Rick's outstanding Metamorphmagus abilities, of which he had been completely unaware until then.

"You weren't invited to this party, Dumbledore – it was intended only for Harry Potter. However, I'm very happy to have you here. You can die together with Potter – how fitting. But first, I'll give you the opportunity to admire my handiwork," said Voldemort, with a wicked laugh, as he gestured towards the ruins of what was once Hogwarts castle.

"Avada Kedavra!" yelled Harry, pointing his wand at Voldemort's chest. A green flash shot from Harry's wand towards Voldemort. He didn't attempt to evade it. He just stood there, with his arms still crossed, grinning smugly, as the green light hit his chest, and dissipated. Harry was stunned. He had never used the Killing Curse

before, but he was certain he could cast it successfully against Voldemort – his parents' murderer, whom he hated passionately. "Stupefy!" he yelled at Voldemort, but the spell seemed to have no effect upon him at all.

"Ha, ha," gloated Voldemort. "You are powerless before me Potter – you too, Dumbledore. I may even let you in on the secret of my immortality – before I kill you both. But first, Dumbledore, take a good look at your beloved Hogwarts – and see how I have triumphed over you. Your pitiful life's work was all for naught – I have obliterated it – completely!" Voldemort's hideously thin lips curled into a horrid, malevolent grin. "Ah, you look confused; you are wondering how and when this happened, perhaps? It happened over three years ago ... welcome to the year 2000!"

"What?" asked Harry, confused. "How can that be?"

"The black cloud," said Voldemort, smugly. "It's temporal magic which I have only recently perfected; it's a Time Portal. I cast it back to early 1997. I've been waiting for you to get close enough to it, for me to draw you through. It was a one-way portal, by the way, and I removed it as soon as you had passed through it. There is absolutely no way for you to return to your own time. You're stuck here – although it won't be for long...." he added, maliciously.

"Why would you want to bring Harry into the future?" asked Dumbledore.

"You died when I destroyed Hogwarts, Dumbledore, along with all of your professors and students. My Death Eaters had already pulled their children from the school, they knew what was coming. Potter, however, managed to elude me – yet again. I suppose you had an emergency Portkey or something like that to spirit him away. But everyone else died that day, including the great hope of the Light, my other great nemesis – Rick Godfry.

"I didn't know about Godfry until that day. That's when I realised it was him who had turned so many of my once-valuable Death Eaters into worthless, detestable Squibs. I knew the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor was just a cover, but I didn't know whose. I suspected it

was you, Dumbledore, until Godfry revealed himself that day and I discovered what he was.

“Of course I didn’t send any Death Eaters to attack Hogwarts; I knew what would happen to them. I had already lost too many supporters to Godfry’s blasted Squibbus Curse. No, I attacked Hogwarts with Dark Creatures and beasts. I opened up a Spatial Portal, that completely by-passed your Wards,” he said, with a conceited grin. “I sent through my dark hordes to attack you.”

“I made the mistake of sending my Dementors in last. By the time they arrived that accursed Godfry had transformed most of my Dark Creatures and beasts into harmless pets. I was watching from the other side of the portal. I was furious. But although he was invisible – pretending to be that blasted ghost – my Dementors could sense him. Godfry managed to hold them off for quite some time with his blasted Patronuses. But he couldn’t destroy them, nor could he transform them. Eventually they got close enough to affect him. That’s when Godfry revealed himself. Then it was all over. My Dementors had a wonderful feast that day – all those souls – including yours, Dumbledore – and Godfry’s,” he added, chuckling evilly.

“After that, all resistance crumbled. I have been in complete control of the magical world, since that day. I killed all those who had been foolish enough to oppose me. All the Squibs and Mudbloods were exterminated like the vermin they are. The half-castes were all enslaved, and placed under the Imperius Curse. They’ve been sterilized too, so they’ll soon die out. But first, I’ll use them in my final battle: the destruction of the Muggle world.”

“You are mad, Tom,” said Dumbledore.

“How dare you!” exploded Voldemort. “Crucio!” he screamed, pointing his wand at Dumbledore. The curse hit Dumbledore’s Reflecting Shield. Voldemort’s reflexes were excellent. He saw his curse returning and quickly threw up a shield to protect himself from it.

“Damn you Dumbledore, I knew Godfry had taught Potter to cast that blasted Reflecting Shield of his. It seems that you too, have mastered it,” spat Voldemort, angrily.

“Your protection doesn’t appear to work against your own curses,” observed Dumbledore serenely.

“No, it does not!” snarled Voldemort. “How do you think I almost died that night when I tried to kill blasted Potter here, when he was a baby? His mother, somehow, put some protection on him that sent my Killing Curse back at me. To this day, I have not been able to discover what it was, or, how she did it. I was already protected by the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin on that fateful night. I’d had the cloak since my fifth year at Hogwarts. I found it in the Chamber of Secrets, where Salazar Slytherin had left it for his heir – Me. But it took me many years to find the spells that would allow me to wear it. It was only weeks before I killed Potter’s parents that I finally succeeded.”

“Didn’t you notice, Dumbledore, when we duelled at the Ministry of Magic, that you couldn’t touch me? Your spells all just dissolved! I’m immortal! Or at least I will be, when I finally kill Harry Potter. I’m determined to kill him and lay that blasted Prophecy to rest, before I embark on my greatest battle: the conquest and destruction of the Muggles. I haven’t heard anything at all from that damned Potter since the day I destroyed Hogwarts. My Death Eaters have been searching for him everywhere, but he continues to elude me,” said Voldemort angrily.

“He’s been a constant thorn in my side – the final threat to my immortality – I must destroy him. It was because I’ve been unable find him, in the present time, that I decided to abduct him from a time when I could locate him – before the destruction of Hogwarts, when he disappeared. Once I’ve killed this Potter, here, from 1997, the one in the present time will simply cease to exist. My immortality will be guaranteed.”

“You are playing with fire, Tom,” warned Dumbledore sternly. “No one knows the consequences of changing the past. You may end up killing yourself – you may simply cease to exist. The whole world might cease to exist. Don’t you realise how immensely dangerous it is to try changing the past?”

“Don’t lecture me, like you’re still my professor, you doddering old fool! I’m not interested in all your goody-goody rules and holier-than-thou morality,” snarled Voldemort. “In your time, you are about to die in a few weeks anyway. Potter has done nothing, since he disappeared – but plague my mind. Removing you two from your time and killing you now, will have no effect at all.”

“You cannot know that Tom,” responded Dumbledore, shaking his head. “Time is very complicated and subtle. Just one word, one gesture can change the whole of history – you have no idea what you are doing!”

“Shut up!” screamed Voldemort. “I am the Lord of this world, everyone fears and obeys me – you are no one here – you are already dead!”

“You do not seem to be having much success with killing us, Tom.” said Dumbledore, defiantly.

“You two can’t hold those shields for much longer; it must require huge amounts of energy. Once you weaken and drop them, I’ll dispose of you both. It’s quite a bonus for me, Dumbledore – getting to kill you twice,” laughed Voldemort callously. “I’ve waited a long time to finally finish off Potter – I can wait a little longer.”

Voldemort made an elaborate movement with his wand, uttering a long incantation. Within a minute he was surrounded by hundreds of Death Eaters who had immediately responded to his summons by Apparating to him at Hogwarts.

“Death Eaters,” commanded Voldemort, “encircle these two and keep up a constant barrage of curses and hexes. Don’t use anything too nasty. They are protected by Reflecting Shields, so your curses and hexes will rebound upon you. Try to maintain a Deflecting Shield, if you are able to. Keep cursing them until they can no longer hold their shields. Then, it will be my pleasure, to torture them – before finally finishing them off.”

As the Death Eaters raised their wands to begin, Dumbledore yelled out “Squibbus!”

“What are you playing at, Dumbledore?” barked Voldemort. “Only that blasted Godfry was able perform that spell. I know all about your precious Godfry. I have recently developed great Necromancy powers that allow me to communicate with the spirits of dark wizards. They told me how those busy-bodies, those interfering spirits of the witches and wizards of the Light, gave Godfry all sorts of powers to defeat me. But it didn’t work – as you can see,” he said, gesturing towards the ruins of Hogwarts. “They didn’t give him the power to destroy Dementors – but of course they couldn’t, because there is no power that can destroy Dementors. However, if you keep them well-fed, Dementors are the most obedient of servants ... and I keep my Dementors very well fed – you may be sure.”

“Death Eaters!” yelled Voldemort, casting a withering gaze upon his servants. “I ordered you to curse them! Why aren’t you doing it?”

“Because they are all Squibs!” said Dumbledore smiling happily.

Voldemort observed his Death Eaters’ futile attempts at cursing Dumbledore and Harry and realised it was true. He was absolutely furious. The Death Eaters, suddenly realising they were Squibs and knowing the fate of their kind, turned and ran for their lives. But they needn’t have worried; Voldemort’s attention was otherwise engaged.

“You’re not Dumbledore at all!” spat Voldemort as the realisation sank in. “You’re that accursed Godfry!” Rick responded by morphing to his true form.

“Pleased to meet you too,” said Rick. Then grinning at Voldemort, he continued. “I think you may have overlooked something, Voldy. You’re so smug and conceited and sure of yourself, so certain of your own infallibility. Arrogant fools like you, who think they can make no mistakes, usually do. In fact, they usually make very stupid mistakes – like you just did.”

“What are you talking about, you impertinent brat?” snarled Voldemort, furious at Rick’s insolence.

“Well, you seem awfully worried about Harry Potter. You know that he’s out there, somewhere, ready to fulfil his destiny, as foretold in the Prophecy – by killing you. Just one mortal enemy has you totally rattled. You’re so obsessed with your precious immortality that your mind will torment you – you will never have a moment’s peace – while a mortal enemy stalks you.”

“Can’t you see what a stupid fool you’ve been, Voldy?” taunted Rick, mockingly. “You only had one mortal enemy – one Harry Potter to fear. But you’ve just brought a second Harry Potter into your world, along with me – Rick Godfry, whose mission, as you know, is to destroy you. You thought you’d disposed of me, three years ago, but now you’ve brought me back to life. You used to have only one powerful mortal enemy to fear in your world – now you have three of us. Harry, pick up your broom, and give me your hand, we’re going to Apparate away from here.”

“What? But you can’t!” screamed Voldemort, more in fear than rage.

“Oh, but we can, and there’s nothing you can do to stop us – although you’re more than welcome to try a Killing Curse. Stay on your toes, Voldy! Keep looking over your shoulder, because there are three of us out there now. If you have really found out all about me, then you’ll know that my powers are greater, even than yours. Rest assured – we’ll find a way of overcoming your protective cloak – and when we do we’ll come after you. Sooner or later, we’ll get you!”

Rick grasped Harry’s hand. In the moment just before they vanished, Rick looked up. High up in the sky, circling overhead was a Golden Eagle. Rick smiled to himself.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 20 - Talking Time

Gripping his broom tightly in his right hand, and Rick's hand with his left, Harry felt as though his body had dissolved. There was absolute silence, there was nothing to see. Harry's senses all strained, but there was nothing for them to touch. The world had vanished, leaving him – or his awareness at least, behind. It was a bizarre experience, but oddly pleasant and comforting.

Then suddenly, the world materialised once more, around him. He found himself standing with Rick, by the lake, with the Hogwarts castle in front of him. But this time it wasn't destroyed – in fact, it looked just the same as always.

"Rick! What happened? What did you do? Where are we?" asked Harry, feeling very confused.

"Exactly where we were a moment ago," said Rick smiling. "The question is when are we? If I got it right, this is the same Saturday morning that we were out flying together, when Voldemort pulled us into the future. We've returned to when we came from. I just wanted Voldemort to think we were Apparating away – to put the wind up him. Did you catch that look of fear and loathing on his face as we were leaving? Oh, and did you notice that Golden Eagle circling high above us?"

"Err, no," said Harry. "A Golden Eagle? You don't think ... that it was me?"

"I'm almost certain it was," replied Rick. "You must have mastered the Animagus transformation before Voldemort attacked Hogwarts. That's how you escaped him after Hogwarts fell – you just flew away. And that's why he can't find you in his time. You're staying in your Golden Eagle form. He hasn't got a hope in hell of finding you – and it's driving him slowly crazy!"

"Rick, is it true what Voldemort said about you?" asked Harry. "About the spirits of the witches and wizards of the Light giving you all your powers and sending you here to defeat him?"

“Yeah, mate,” said Rick. “Something like that. But, in fact, I discovered I can’t kill anyone – not even Voldemort. I’m here to help you – but in the end, it’s you, not me, who has to kill the evil sod.”

“Just like the Prophecy says,” murmured Harry. “So you’re the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor! You saved me from being dragged off to Voldemort that night by Lucius Malfoy, when you Squibbed him. Gosh, Rick, I owe you.... You’ve saved me so many times.”

“Just doing my job, mate,” said Rick, smiling.

“But Rick, what happened that day the Death Eaters attacked us at Hogsmeade station?” asked Harry. “Hermione said that you’d gone to get the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. But you are the ghost! So where were you really, when I was fighting off all those Death Eaters?”

Rick sighed, looking down at his feet. “Err, Harry, I’m really sorry about that. But ... well, you see, I stayed behind on the train, with, err ... with Hermione. We were, sort of, err —”

“Snogging?” asked Harry. Rick nodded, still looking at his feet. “Boy, that must have been some snog – if you didn’t notice a massive Death Eater attack!”

“Yeah, I seem to get rather absorbed ...” said Rick in embarrassment. “I’m really sorry about it, mate. I felt terrible when I realised there was an attack. You have no idea how relieved I was to find you alive.”

“Forget it,” said Harry, sighing. “It seems pretty unimportant when you think of the future we’ve just seen. Even with all the powers you received, you won’t be able to stop the Dementors when Voldemort attacks Hogwarts. It looks like all our efforts will be for nothing in the end – Voldemort is going to destroy Hogwarts – and soon. I just can’t get those images of the castle, all in ruins, out of my mind. Hogwarts – this castle – symbolises everything that is good and wonderful and magical in my life. To see it in ruins like that ... to think of everyone kissed by the Dementors ... and me escaping. I wouldn’t want to keep living with that on my mind....” But Harry couldn’t continue. It was too upsetting to think about.

“Harry, we need to go talk with Dumbledore, right away,” said Rick, as they started for the castle. “Maybe it doesn’t mean what we think it does. Maybe it’s not inevitable. I’m not giving up yet – that’s for sure. Hey, there’s Hermione. It looks like she’s been searching for us.”

“Harry! Rick! Where did you two get to? I’ve been looking for you since breakfast!” exclaimed Hermione, sounding concerned, as she approached the two boys.

“Looks like I got us back to the right day at least,” quipped Rick conspiratorially to Harry.

“What are you talking about, Rick?” demanded Hermione, her worry changing to annoyance. She hated it when she didn’t understand something – especially when it was Rick behaving mysteriously.

“Harry, Ginny said she saw you flying by yourself along the edge of the Forbidden Forest about an hour ago. But, when I looked out there a few minutes later, you were nowhere to be seen. Where on earth have you two been?” implored Hermione.

“We’ve been right here, by the Hogwarts Lake – well, for the past half-hour at least,” said Rick, with one of his infuriating grins.

“That’s a lie, Rick! How can you lie to me, like that?” she said angrily. “I’ve been out here for almost an hour. I must have passed this spot at least twice, in the past half-hour, and neither of you were here – unless you were under invisibility cloaks, or something.”

“Honest, Hermione, we were by the lake and we weren’t invisible,” said Rick. “But when I say we were here, I’m speaking spatially, not temporally.”

“Rick! Stop that teasing, you know it drives me crazy!” cried Hermione in exasperation. “I want to know what happened to you two – right now!”

“Then maybe you’d better come with us to the Headmaster’s office. We were on our way there to tell him all about it. There’s no way I’m going to start the story until then, or we’ll never get there!”

“Alright,” said Hermione in resignation. “But hurry up at least!”

Professor Dumbledore and Hermione listened, spellbound, as Harry and Rick gave a full account of where and when they had been – and of everything that had happened. When they’d finished, the three students looked expectantly at their headmaster, eager for his reaction. They were seated in great puffy armchairs, which he had summoned for them, in front of his large desk. Dumbledore sat silently in his chair behind the desk, lost in thought.

“Lemon Drop, anyone?” asked Dumbledore finally, offering around his favourite sweet with a relaxed smile on his face. Only Rick took one. Harry and Hermione were stunned that Professor Dumbledore could react with such a lack of concern at the prospect of Hogwarts’ imminent destruction.

“Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione in a worried voice, no longer able to contain herself. “If Harry and Rick actually witnessed the school in ruins, then surely it means it’s inevitable that it will happen, and nothing can be done to prevent it ... doesn’t it?”

“On the contrary, Miss Granger,” replied Dumbledore, smiling calmly, “There are many things that can be done to avert the catastrophe witnessed by your friends. In fact —”

“But ... err, excuse me, sir, for interrupting you,” said Hermione, unable to restrain herself. “You warned me most emphatically, in third year, about the dangers of attempting to change time – so how can we prevent one tragedy without risking perhaps an even greater one?”

“You are quite correct, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore leaning back comfortably in his seat and smiling benignly. “I most certainly did warn you of the grave dangers involved in attempting to influence the future, by changing the past. However, if one is very thoughtful, and careful, it is possible. I believe that you and Mr. Potter can attest to

that, from your own experience,” he added with a smile, his eyes twinkling.

“If one goes back no more than an hour or two, and acts with the utmost caution, it is possible to obtain a very limited and contained change, which will have no serious side-effects, in time. But if one goes back any further than that, there are far too many unknowns, too many permutations in the chain of cause and effect resulting from one’s actions. It becomes impossible to know how the smallest, most insignificant action – even something as trivial, for example, as returning a book to one shelf, rather than another – will change the future.”

“I must compliment you, Mr. Godfry on the admonishment you delivered to Voldemort ... in my name,” said Dumbledore, smiling at Rick. “I think your impersonation did me justice. I would, indeed, have said very much the same thing to Voldemort, myself. And, it was a master stroke, to make him think that you and Harry were merely Apparating away, in his own time, rather than returning to your own. I imagine that his obsessive fears for his immortality must be quite unbearable. It will probably delay indefinitely, his planned campaign against the Muggles.”

“Yes, that’s what I was hoping, sir,” said Rick. “But there was another reason for the pretence. I didn’t want Voldemort to know that we were returning to our own time. I was afraid if he knew, he might make another attempt at snatching Harry back to the future. As soon as I realised we’d been pulled through to the future, I became aware that I could go back to my own time and take Harry with me – I just needed to twist my wand and decide the exact date and time. But since we were safely behind the Reflecting Shield, I figured we should stay a while, and see what useful information we could pick up.”

“It was an excellent idea, Mr. Godfry,” said Dumbledore. “If I’m not mistaken, you have the ability to move through time as easily as you Apparate through space. I recently discovered a secret journal, written by Godric Gryffindor. It appears that he possessed the power of Time Travel, although he kept it secret. He could move backwards and forwards in time at will, without requiring a Time Turner or any other magical aids – except for his wand. It appears that there is

something special about his wand, because he was unable to do it with any other wand. No one, but Gryffindor, was able to do it, even using his wand – except, it seems, for you, Mr. Godfry,” said Dumbledore, smiling at Rick.

“What? You mean, you have Godric Gryffindor’s wand?” asked Harry, incredulously.

Rick just nodded, and then looked back towards the Headmaster.

“I must warn you,” Dumbledore continued, looking Rick very seriously, “that for all your special abilities, you are in no way immune from the considerable dangers involved in Time Travel. Many witches and wizards have experimented with Time Travel, using Time Turners and various other magical means. Some have been foolish enough to try changing the past. The result has always been disastrous. Tempusilo Viator, the most famous Time Traveller of all, vanished unaccountably and mysteriously at a very early age. It is assumed that he changed something in the past which negated his own existence. Beware, Mr. Godfry!”

“Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry, feeling confused. “How are we going to prevent Voldemort from destroying Hogwarts? I mean, you keep talking about the dangers of changing time. So how can we do it, without creating some other catastrophe?”

“But don’t you see the irony of it?” asked Dumbledore cheerfully. “Voldemort has already done it for us! When he pulled you and Mr. Godfry into the future, he changed the past. He broke all the rules, and now he must suffer the consequences. He has told us exactly how, and roughly when, Hogwarts will be attacked. He even told Mr. Godfry how to deal with the Dark Creatures that he will send – by transforming them into something harmless. He has also warned us that the one thing that can defeat us is Dementors, so now we know where to focus our attention. We can act on the information Voldemort unintentionally provided. The cardinal sin of Time Travel is going back and changing the past. Voldemort has committed that sin. However, acting in the present moment with the intention of determining future events, is perfectly safe – we do it all day long.”

“The future you witnessed,” continued Dumbledore, “has not yet happened, and indeed may never happen. It is simply a possibility. It is, at this moment, only one, of an infinite number of possible futures. What has happened in the past is fixed – unless someone is foolish enough to meddle with it – as Voldemort has done. But the future is not yet cast.”

“So, you’re saying we are free to do what we like to avert the destruction of Hogwarts,” said Hermione, fascinated. “What Harry and Rick saw was the future that would have been, if Voldemort hadn’t played with time and pulled them into the future. By doing that, he’s changed the past from where he is in the year 2000. If we manage to prevent the destruction of Hogwarts, he might suddenly find himself in a very different world – one in which he is not the undisputed Lord.”

“Exactly, Miss Granger,” replied Dumbledore, smiling. “Then there is the matter of the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin. I am not entirely convinced that it is impregnable. If we can find a way to penetrate it, Voldemort in the year 2000 might simply disappear altogether – because he was killed, before that year ever arrived.”

“Do you mean it may have an Achilles Heel, Professor?” asked Hermione. “What makes you think that?”

“Voldemort has been acting very cautiously for someone who believes himself to be immune from the magic of others. It is true that my spells did not seem to harm him, when we fought in the Ministry of Magic last year. But if he was certain of his invincibility, why did he Apparate away as soon as the Ministry Aurors arrived? Why didn’t he stay to finish off Harry, when he finally had the chance? Voldemort is not the most modest of men. If this cloak makes him truly invincible, he would be crowing about it. It is not in his nature to keep quiet about something like that.”

“So our two priorities are to find a way of dealing with the Dementors, and trying to discover how to penetrate Voldemort’s protective cloak,” said Hermione. “It’s a pity that we can’t change the past. Rick could go back in time and remove the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin from the Chamber of Secrets long before Tom Riddle was even born. But we

can't do that, can we, sir?" asked Hermione, looking up at Dumbledore hopefully.

The Headmaster smiled at her, shaking his head. "Things that happened so long ago must be left to happen as they will, I am afraid...." After a few moments of silent contemplation, he continued. "It is most interesting that Voldemort's cloak does not protect him from his own charms. Salazar Slytherin must have done it deliberately. It was probably necessary, so the wearer could do magic himself. The wearer's magic has to be able to pass through the cloak, but it seems that it can pass in both directions. Of course, Salazar Slytherin would not have thought about Reflecting Shields, as they were unknown in the time of the Founders. In fact, there are only a handful of wizards who have ever been able to effectively cast the Reflecting Shield – and two of them are sitting in this room," he added, smiling at Rick and Harry.

"If it's a cloak, would it protect his head?" asked Harry. "Would it be possible to get it off of him?"

"I don't think it's a cloak in the ordinary sense, Harry," replied Dumbledore. "It's a Spell Cloak. Once Voldemort had mastered the magic to wear it, it would have become an invisible part of him, protecting his entire body, including his head. Only Voldemort, himself, would be able to remove it. Salazar Slytherin was a powerful magician, and particularly gifted in the art of magical protection. I doubt very much that there was any flaw in the cloak when he created it. If there is one now, then something must have caused it ... I wonder what it could have been?"

"Professor?" said Hermione, thoughtfully. "If Salazar Slytherin hadn't considered the possibility of the wearer's own spell rebounding, and penetrating the cloak from the outside, then he wouldn't have considered the possibility that it might damage the cloak."

"Very astute, Miss Granger!" said the Headmaster enthusiastically. "You're quite correct. He would have paid no attention to that particular possibility when he created the cloak. It is indeed conceivable that the wearer's own spell, penetrating the cloak, could damage it."

“And we know of an occasion when that happened,” said Hermione excitedly. “The night Voldemort killed Harry’s parents – and tried to kill Harry.”

“But, how does that help us?” asked Harry, sounding upset. He felt hurt that Hermione was trespassing on that event, which, for him, was so charged with grief and pain.

“I’m sorry, Harry, I know you don’t like talking or thinking about that night,” said Hermione sympathetically. “It must be terribly painful for you, but we have to – it could be really important.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Dumbledore, nodding his head. It was clear that he and Hermione were on the same track. “If the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin has in fact been damaged, as Voldemort’s actions – both in the past and the future – suggest, it was almost certainly the Killing Curse that not only failed to kill Harry as a baby, but rebounded upon Voldemort, with such disastrous consequences – for himself.”

Hermione could no longer contain herself. “So, if Rick—”

“Precisely, Miss Granger,” said the Headmaster smiling at her. “If Mr. Godfrey were to go back to that night, and observe very carefully what happens when Voldemort attempts to kill Harry, he might discover where the weakness in the cloak is located. If he is able to pinpoint the exact location on Voldemort’s body where the green flash of his own Killing Curse strikes him, then we will have found Voldemort’s Achilles Heel.”

“Exactly!” said Hermione, excitedly, her mind in overdrive. “Is it true, sir,” she asked the Headmaster, “that the protection Harry’s mother used to save him from Voldemort that night, is a great mystery – even now, as Voldemort said?”

“Yes, indeed, Miss Granger. There are many forms of protective magic. As you will know, from your own studies of Empathetic Magic with Professor McGonagall, there is a special magical relationship between a witch and her baby. The magic which protected Harry from

Voldemort when he tried to steal the Sorcerer's Stone in your first year, is very rare, but not unknown. Even though Voldemort was in the body of Professor Quirrell, he was still unable to physically touch Harry."

"Yet Professor Quirrell was able to curse Harry and nearly kill him in his first Quidditch match," said Hermione, thoughtfully. "That curse didn't rebound on him. I was wondering, sir, if perhaps Rick could go back a bit before Voldemort attacks. He may hear Harry's parents talking about the protection his mother used. He may even witness her casting the spell. It would be a very valuable spell to know about."

"Yes, I agree, Miss Granger," said Professor Dumbledore. "At the time, I questioned Lily and James' closest friends, and more recently, Sirius Black. Some of them recalled that Lily was researching protection spells, but none of them knew what she had found – or had used to protect Harry. It has been a great mystery, all these years, and it could be a very valuable spell to have at our disposal. After all, it stopped Voldemort. It almost destroyed him, in fact."

Harry remained silent. He was feeling very peculiar and uncomfortable about this whole conversation. It was all about him, and the night Voldemort had murdered his parents, the night Voldemort had tried to kill him, when he was a baby. The night he became famous – as The Boy Who Lived. Harry loathed that label. He shunned the undeserved fame. But most of all, he didn't want to think about the events of that night, which had orphaned him and set his life's course. Now they were talking about Rick going back there – actually being there, when it all happened. He was going to go back there, like some Time Tourist and just watch it all happen, without lifting a finger to prevent the great tragedy of his life. A tragedy, which had robbed him of his loving parents, and left him to grow up – unloved and unwanted – with the beastly Dursleys.

Harry's mind was filled with all the possibilities of averting the calamity of that Halloween Night. There were so many ways the tragedy could be prevented. Rick could warn his parents not to trust Peter Pettigrew as their secret keeper, or Memory Charm Pettigrew so he couldn't reveal the secret. He could at least warn his parents that they'd be betrayed, so they could flee Godric's Hollow for

Hogwarts or somewhere safer. With all his powers, Rick could stop Voldemort from killing his parents. But no, Dumbledore would forbid him to change anything. He wouldn't even be allowed to prevent Pettigrew from committing mass murder and then pinning it on Sirius, who would rot for twelve years in Azkaban. Harry wished he could shut off his mind. He just didn't want to think about it anymore.

"Harry," said Dumbledore kindly, drawing him out of these painful, self-enclosing thoughts. "I know this must be very unpleasant for you. It will be stirring up very painful thoughts and emotions. I wish we didn't need to do this – to send Mr. Godfrey back to that fateful night – but I believe we must. This could provide us with the key to finally ridding our world of Voldemort. You have seen, firsthand, what the future holds, not only for the magical world, but for the Muggle world also, if Voldemort is not stopped."

Harry didn't respond, he just continued staring down at the carpet. "I imagine that you are thinking about all the ways, in which your parents' lives might be saved. Am I correct?" Dumbledore asked Harry, sympathetically.

Harry nodded silently, his sad eyes downcast.

"Unfortunately, I cannot allow it. If Mr. Godfrey attempts to change anything at all on that Halloween night, the result will almost certainly be totally disastrous. In all documented cases, the outcome has inevitably been calamitous for the one who changed the past. The result is almost always the opposite of what was intended. But that aside, it should be quite obvious to you what the immediate consequence would be in this case, if Mr. Godfrey attempted to save your parents."

"You mean Voldemort wouldn't lose all his powers and disappear," said Harry, blankly, still looking down at the floor.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "You are, perhaps, unaware of how dire the situation was at that time – you couldn't know. Voldemort's power was growing daily. The Order of the Phoenix was heavily outnumbered. The Ministry of Magic was weak and riddled with Death Eaters in high places. Voldemort's victory seemed a certainty – it was

only a matter of time. Many of the weaker witches and wizards, who were not at all sympathetic to Voldemort's cause, were, nevertheless, flocking to his ranks – to save themselves."

"Like that traitor, Pettigrew!" spat Harry.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, sighing. He was silent for a few moments, lost in memories of the horrors of those times. "Things were even worse then, than they were at the beginning of this year. If Voldemort had not killed your parents that night and then attempted to kill you – and in so doing, met his downfall, he would undoubtedly have soon triumphed over the Order and those who still opposed him. Your parents, along with everyone else in the Order, would ultimately have perished, along with the Squibs, the Muggle-born witches and wizards, and many others. I know you resent your fame, Harry," said Dumbledore, smiling kindly at him. "But you have to understand the feeling of joy and deliverance from a great and impending doom, that the wizarding world felt when they learned of Voldemort's demise, that Halloween night when he failed to kill you."

Harry remained silent, his eyes fixed steadfastly to the floor.

After a few moments, Dumbledore turned his attention back to Rick. "You may not change anything, at all. You may only observe the painful events of that night, as they unfold. Under no circumstances may you interfere with those events. To do so, would almost certainly mean that Voldemort would not fall on that night. I need hardly tell you what the terrible consequences would be. I am certain that none of us want to find ourselves living in such a world."

Rick nodded his agreement. "I will abide by your wishes, to the letter, Professor Dumbledore. So when do I go?" he asked.

"The sooner, the better," said Dumbledore. "In fact, I suggest you go right now. You will have noticed that when you travel through time, your location remains unchanged. I suggest you make yourself invisible and Apparate directly to Godric's Hollow. Then, go back to the 31st of October, 1981, at around six o'clock in the evening. That should give you several hours before Voldemort arrives. We will wait for you here. You should return to the exact moment in time that you

departed. To us, it will seem like you were hardly gone at all, regardless of how long you actually spend in the past. Good luck, Rick – and remember the golden rule of Time Travel: Change nothing!”

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 21 - Halloween 1981

When Rick arrived at Godric's Hollow, he found himself outside the Potters' cottage, in what must have been the garden. It was an unruly mass of weeds now. The cottage itself lay in ruins. The roof was gone, and nothing remained of the doors or windows. Creepers and vines grew thickly over what remained of the walls. It looked like it had been left untouched since that fateful Halloween night, sixteen years ago. Rick held up Godric Gryffindor's wand, twisting it slightly as he closed his eyes and concentrated on going back in time. This time he paid attention to the process. It was like stepping out of the present into no-where, or more accurately No Time, then stepping back into another time. It was a bit like stepping out of one compartment on the Hogwarts Express into the corridor and then entering another compartment.

When he opened his eyes, the cottage looked quite different. It was no longer in ruins. It looked very picturesque, with creepers growing up the stone walls. Light shone from the windows on the autumn leaves scattered about outside. Rick was very much aware of Dumbledore's warning about not changing anything. He had to make certain that no one noticed him. When he had been spying on Umbridge, Draco, and the Slytherins, the previous term, he had discovered that he could Disapparate without having to immediately Apparatesomewhere else. It was like his body was nowhere at all, but his mind and senses were wherever he wanted them to be. It was much better than just being invisible, because no one could trip over him, hear him, or smell him. He decided to use the technique now. He had to make sure that he wasn't noticed.

Upon entering the house, Rick found himself in a large, comfortable, and homely lounge room. There was a lively fire burning in the fireplace. The room was a bit messy, with toys spread over the sofa and spilling onto the floor. Rick couldn't see anyone, but he heard voices coming from the next room. Following the voices, he found himself in the kitchen, where the Potters were finishing their evening meal. The first thing that struck Rick was how young they looked – only a few years older than himself. Yet here they were, already married – and with a baby. Rick tried to picture himself in a scene like

this in a few years' time – with Hermione, of course. It was quite appealing.

James was laughing at Harry, who was thumping the little table of his high chair, amusing himself as his empty bowl and cup danced about. There was no doubt at all that this was James Potter. Rick had expected him to look a lot like Harry, but the resemblance was so striking that he had to tell himself No, that's not Harry Potter, that's James Potter – Harry's the baby. The thick black tufts of hair standing out at all angles from the baby's head, and the bright green eyes, were a dead giveaway, that the baby was, indeed, Harry Potter.

"James, you're supposed to be cleaning up the baby, not playing with him," said Lily, sounding exasperated, as she cleared the table. She was an attractive witch, slim and petite. Those green eyes and pale white face, framed by masses of dark red hair, made a striking combination. "Sometimes I wonder which one of you is the baby – honestly!" She flicked her wand at Harry, muttering a Cleaning Charm. "There, I've done it. Now all you have to do is take him to the lounge ... I'm sure you can manage, if you put your mind to it."

James laughed at Lily's admonishment. "I sure can. Come on, Harry, it's time for your flying lessons."

"Oh, do be careful with the baby," said Lily, sounding concerned. Harry was making happy excited noises; he obviously knew what flying lessons were. Lily knew he loved them, but she always worried that James would get carried away and not be careful. Honestly, sometimes it seems like he's hardly changed since he was at Hogwarts, pulling all sorts of dangerous pranks with his friends – when will he ever grow up? she thought, smiling to herself and shaking her head.

James, meanwhile, had cast a Levitation Charm on little Harry, who was gurgling happily as he rose up from his high chair and waved his arms and legs as he floated about the kitchen, guided by his father's wand. He loved this game. James would bring him close to things which he would try to grab hold of – but not close enough for him to actually grasp them. Lily had her back to them as she tidied up. James floated little Harry right over her head. He was delighted to be

able to grab hold of his mother's thick red hair with his tiny little hands. She reached up above her head and pulled Harry into a hug.

"So, you want to be a Seeker, my little man? You think Mummy's your Snitch, do you?" she said, holding him out in front of her and smiling lovingly at him.

Harry waved his arms about, saying "Snitch, fly, fly, Snitch," smiling happily at his mother. They were the only words he could say so far, apart from 'Mumum' and 'Dada'. Lily laughed and gave him another cuddle and kiss before holding him up.

"Our little Seeker wants more flying lessons, James," said Lily, as her baby gently floated up, out of her hands. James flew a happy little Harry into the lounge.

"Snitch! Snitch!" demanded Harry. James reached into his pocket and, with a grin, pulled out a special Snitch which he had enchanted to go wherever he pointed. It was quite a bit smaller than a regulation Quidditch Snitch – just the right size for his son's tiny little hands. He threw it up in the air, and then with his left hand moved it so that it was flying just in front of Harry. Harry gurgled happily, stretching out a little hand towards it and calling to it, "Snitch! Snitch!" This was Harry's favourite game, and he was having a great time as his father flew him around the lounge room with the Snitch ducking and diving in front of him, its golden wings beating rapidly. Whenever the Snitch came within arm's reach, Harry grabbed it in his little hand, much to his delight – and that of his proud father.

"You're going to be a great Seeker some day, little laddie," said James, smiling indulgently at his son. "I can hardly wait 'till you're old enough to fly on a broom – then we'll have some serious fun!"

"James! Don't you even think about it! There's no way I'm letting my little boy go off on a broom with you! The minute you get on a broom you lose all your common sense. Although in your case all isn't all that much," said Lily grinning at him. "Come on, hand over that little man to his Mummy. You're getting him over-excited again, and it's time for him to go to sleep."

“Come on, Lily,” said James, bringing Harry gently down into his mother’s waiting arms, “you know heaps of Sleeping Charms; you never fail to send our little chappie off to dreamland. Bring him here so he can give his Dada a big kiss goodnight.” Lily smiled as she placed Harry in James’ arms.

“Watch out!” called Lily. But it was too late.

Quick as flash, Harry had pulled his father’s gold-framed glasses from his face and was waving them around happily, crying, “Snitch! Snitch!”

“For heaven’s sake, James,” laughed Lily. “You never learn, do you? Remember – you’re supposed to take your glasses off before you take Harry in your arms – before he takes them off for you. Here Harry, here’s Padfoot,” she said, handing him a large dog with shaggy fur, and grabbing James’ glasses from him as he held out his little hands to take his favourite fur animal from her.

Harry grabbed his fur dog. “Padfook!” he exclaimed, hugging it. James and Lily burst out laughing at his mispronunciation of Sirius’ nickname.

“Padfoot,” said Lily slowly to Harry, who was happily holding on to his dog as his father held him in his arms. “Padfoot,” she said again, pointing at the fur dog.

“Padfook!” said Harry, grinning happily.

Lily sighed. “Sirius will be over the moon when we tell him that his name was the fifth word spoken by his favourite little godson.”

“Yeah,” laughed James, “even if he didn’t get it quite right. I kind of like the way Harry says it, actually. I think I’ll start calling him ‘Padfook’ as well.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” laughed Lily. “He’ll probably start calling you something nasty ... like ‘Pongs’.”

“Pongs!” said Harry, happily.

“Oh, no!” said James, aghast. “Now look what you’ve done. I’m going to have to memory charm the little blighter!”

“Don’t you dare,” said Lily, in mock horror. “It’s time for bath and bed for this little man.” And with that, she took Harry from his father’s arms and disappeared up the stairs.

James sat down in a comfortable armchair near the fire. He summoned a pouf to put his feet on, and then summoned a book that was lying on a table. It was a book on defensive spells which Rick remembered speed reading at Flourish and Blotts. Rick turned his attention to a large bookshelf which covered half of one wall. Many of the books were unfamiliar to him. He wondered if perhaps one of them might contain information about the magic Lily had used to protect Harry.

By the time Lily returned, Rick had finished speed reading all the books that were new to him. Lily waved her wand at the mess of toys covering the sofa and the floor. They rose up into the air like a hurricane, before pouring into a large toy trunk, against the wall. “Honestly, James,” she said, as she closed the lid of the trunk with a flick of her wand, “you could at least have cleaned up the mess – there were toys everywhere.”

“Really? What mess?” asked James, puzzled, looking up from his book. “I didn’t see any mess.”

“You never do,” sighed Lily. “You’d be perfectly happy living in a pigsty!”

“As long as you were my sow, I’m sure I would,” said James, looking at Lily affectionately.

“I’m not sure whether to take that as a compliment or an insult,” laughed Lily. “But I definitely don’t want to live in a pigsty – even with such an intelligent, charming, and handsome pig as you!”

James laughed.

Lily sat down in the other armchair in front of the fire, opened a large cloth bag, and pulled out her knitting. She was making a cute little cardigan and pants outfit to keep Harry nice and warm as the days grew colder with the approach of winter. She waved her wand at the knitting needles and they rose up a little way in the air and started knitting quietly. "So how was the Order meeting this afternoon?" asked Lily.

"Pretty depressing, actually – things are going from bad to worse. The Death Eaters seem to be able to attack with impunity, and the Ministry of Magic isn't making any serious effort at stopping them. The Ministry's lousy with Death Eaters. All the Ministry does is issue reassuring press releases – which are nothing but lies – about how everyone should stay calm and that the situation is under control."

"Dumbledore took me aside after the meeting," said James. "It seems he's got a very well-placed spy in Voldemort's camp."

Snape, thought Rick.

"According to Dumbledore's spy," continued James, "someone close to us is spying for Voldemort, although he doesn't know who it is."

"Who could it be?" asked Lily, sounding worried. "I can't think of any of our friends who would go over to Voldemort. Can you?"

James just shook his head. "During the meeting, Sirius said something about how Voldemort had been recruiting all the Dark Creatures."

"James, you don't think Remus would —"

"No, I don't think so. I never would have imagined it, but ... I just don't know anymore. So many people are going over to the Dark Side. Maybe Voldemort has some special power over Dark Creatures. It's so hard to know who you can trust these days," said James, sighing. "I'm just glad Dumbledore came up with that Fidelus Charm to protect us."

“But what if it’s Peter? What then? We’ll be defenceless,” said Lily, sounding worried. “Maybe we should have stuck to the original plan and made Sirius our secret-keeper.”

“Yeah, Sirius was the obvious choice – I trust him absolutely. But it was his idea to switch to Peter. I mean, Sirius is such an obvious choice, and like he said himself, who would think it would be Peter? No, Peter’s OK, he’s been my friend since we were eleven, he’d never betray us,” said James, but he didn’t sound completely certain. It was hard to be certain of anything these days.

“I hope you’re right, James. I worry so much for Harry,” said Lily fearfully. “Did you ask Dumbledore for more information about this Prophecy – I wish he wouldn’t always be so secretive about everything. I mean, if it affects us, we have a right to know, don’t we?”

“Yeah, I asked, but he just said the same as before. According to this Prophecy there are two babies who could grow up to be the one who defeats Voldemort – and Harry is definitely one of them. He won’t tell me who the other one is. Only that Voldemort has heard the Prophecy, and should be able to figure out who the two of them are. According to Dumbledore, Voldemort is obsessed with his immortality, and he’ll attempt to eliminate anyone that threatens it.”

“God, why does it have to be Harry – my beautiful baby?” cried Lily, tears running down her face. “It’s just not fair.”

“I know, love,” said James getting up and sitting on the side of Lily’s armchair, putting a comforting arm around her. “But just think. Maybe our little Harry will grow up to be a powerful wizard. He might be the one who finally kills Voldemort and rids the world of all this evil. Just think of that!”

“I don’t care about that!” sobbed Lily. “All I care about is my baby. I want him to be safe. I want him to be happy. I don’t want Harry to be the one who has to face Voldemort. Let someone else save the world – and leave my little boy in peace! God, I wish we could find a way to protect him from that monster,” she cried.

“You haven’t found any new protection charms?” asked James.

"No," sighed Lily. "I've read every book and research paper on the subject. The only one that might be useful is the Sanguis Contego Charm. That's the one I cast on Harry last week."

"Lily, I don't want you to activate that charm; we've already talked about it. You'd have to sacrifice your own life to make it work, wouldn't you?"

"So? Do you think I'd just hand my baby over to Voldemort, to kill? What kind of mother do you think I am?"

"But Lily, love, if we knew for sure that the charm would protect Harry, it might make some sense. But you told me yourself that it won't. All it will do is stop Voldemort from touching him, physically – and maybe give him some kind of protection if he's living with your blood relatives – which means your horrible sister Petunia. That charm won't stop a Killing Curse – you know it, you told me so yourself."

"So what do you want me to do, James? Just hand my baby over to that monster? Is that what you would do?" she cried out, tears running down her face, her bright green eyes filled with fear and anxiety.

James tried to comfort her. "If Voldemort comes, I'll fight him," he said defiantly. "He won't touch a hair on Harry's head while I'm alive. Maybe I can defeat the evil bastard. But if I can't, there's no way you can. If Voldemort kills me, there is no way you can save Harry – and you know it. Voldemort will kill him. You won't be able to stop him, either with curses or the Sanguis Contego Charm. Lily, please promise me that you'll Apparate away if I'm killed. You can't Apparate Harry with you, so you'll have to go alone. It's bad enough if Harry and I die – I don't want you to die as well. Please Lily, love," he pleaded.

Lily shook her head, determinedly. "James, what's the point of talking about it. I could never leave my baby. It's not just about protection – I just couldn't do it. Please, let's stop talking about it," she said, drying her eyes. "It just makes me so sad. What will come, will come – and who knows – maybe it won't. Let's just be happy together while we've

got each other and not think of all the horrible things that might happen some day.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” said James, pulling her closer and kissing her affectionately.

Rick was becoming confused. What the hell is going on? he thought. Its not some day – it’s today! Voldemort will be here soon, and they don’t have a spell to stop him killing Harry. This can’t be right. Can they find the spell before he gets here? They don’t seem to be trying very hard – it looks like they’ve given up searching.

Apart from being confused about how Voldemort would be stopped, Rick was feeling terribly sad. They were a wonderful couple. You could see how much in love they were with each other, how comfortable they were together. Then there was little Harry. Rick didn’t have much experience with babies – well, none that he could remember – but little Harry looked like such a happy little fellow. It was obvious his parents loved him dearly. They were such a happy, loving family. It was just unbearable to think that this idyllic little family was about to be shattered and destroyed. Rick felt like his heart was breaking – it was just too awful to contemplate.

Rick knew what was about to happen and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Well, no – actually there was – that was the problem! There were lots of things he could do to prevent it and save them all – but he knew he mustn’t. It was so hard. Will I be able to hold myself back when Voldemort arrives? he asked himself. He was seriously beginning to wonder if he would.

Lily had taken a book and was reading, trying to distract her mind from all the fears she held for her baby. James had returned to his armchair and his book. It was a lovely homely scene, thought Rick. He occupied his time imagining that it was him and Hermione living in this lovely little cottage with their own baby. But this happy image was not enough to keep the thoughts of impending doom from his mind. Rick didn’t know exactly when Voldemort would come – but come he would. As the minutes ticked by, Rick became more and more tense. The waiting was unbearable.

When Voldemort finally appeared, it all was a bit anti-climatic. No doors bursting in, roofs lifting off, just a small pop as Voldemort Apparated, alone, into the living room. Lily turned and gasped in horror, but James was out of his chair, wand at the ready, poised for action, in an instant.

Voldemort looked quite different from when Rick had seen him last. He was twenty years younger, of course. But also, this was his real body, before it had been destroyed – not the one that had been magically created that night in the graveyard at Little Hangleton. He looked more human, thought Rick, less like a reptile – yet still he did not look completely human – there was something undeniably evil about him – it was palpable.

“You picked the wrong side, Potter,” he said carelessly, not bothering to take up a defensive stance. “Did you really think that old fool Dumbledore would be able to stop me? He’s impotent against me. Do you know why?” he gloated. “He doesn’t understand power – and how to use it. All his goody-goody morality prevents him from attaining real power – he’s afraid of it. Well, I’m not afraid of power – and I have attained it. I have more power than Dumbledore – more power than any wizard on earth!” he boasted.

James said nothing; he just crouched, like a panther, ready to pounce.

“It’s a pity you threw your lot in with him, Potter,” continued Voldemort calmly. “You’re from an ancient Pureblood family – you would have been an asset ... to the winning side. Not only did you pick the wrong side, you also picked the wrong secret keeper. I imagine you’ve realised that by now,” he chuckled evilly. “Your little friend Pettigrew isn’t as foolish as you – he knew which side was the right side – and he was very eager to ingratiate himself to me ... so eager, in fact, that he told me everything. Not just where to find you, but also about your futile attempts to find a spell to protect your son from me.”

“Lily, Apparate, now!” screamed James, before turning his wand on Voldemort, yelling “Flatus Fortis”.

Voldemort just stood there laughing in James' face. "You'll have to do better than that pathetic Blasting Curse, Potter, if you want to stop me." James hit Voldemort with every powerful curse he knew, but Voldemort just continued standing there, laughing evilly. "You're wasting your time, Potter. I'm wearing the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin. It protects me from all spells – you can't touch me."

James leapt bodily at Voldemort, attempting to attack him physically, but somehow, he seemed to slide right past him, falling to the floor. "Oh, and it also protects me from physical attacks as well – I'm invincible. You've wasted enough of my time. I still have to visit the Longbottoms tonight, to dispose of their son – after I've taken care of yours. Goodbye, Potter, Avada Kedavra!" he said, pointing his wand at James, who was struggling to get up from the floor.

Just before the curse hit him, James noticed with satisfaction that Lily had Apparated away. I hope she's safe, was his last mortal thought. Rick saw the deadly flash of green light hit James. He fell back motionless to the floor – eyes frozen open.

But Lily had only Apparated to Harry's room. She grabbed him from his cot, opened the window, and levitated him carefully to the ground, before Apparating down to join him. But, before she could get away, Voldemort was there, standing right in front of her, pointing his wand at baby Harry. He had a wicked, self-satisfied grin on his face.

"So this is the one who would deign to destroy me, Lord Voldemort, the Immortal – the most powerful wizard on earth!" he crowed. Lily was clutching her baby desperately; she turned her back on Voldemort to shield Harry, with her body.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" she begged tearfully.

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now...." said Voldemort, trying to get a clear shot at Harry.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —" Lily implored him.

“Get out of my way and give me the baby – now!” said Voldemort, becoming impatient, as Lily kept twisting and turning to prevent him from getting a clear shot at Harry.

“Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy....” were her last hopeless words before she screamed as the Killing Curse hit her.

Rick felt numb as he watched her fall to the ground – dead. It had been the most difficult moment of his life – restraining himself, when he wanted so desperately to intervene. He was glad he had no physical presence. Voldemort may not have been able to see him, but he would have heard him howling in despair. Rick was overcome with grief from the two deaths he had just witnessed. It was hard to believe that there was goodness and justice in the world when such good people as these could be struck down in cold blood by so cruel and heartless a monster. Rick tried to console himself with the thought that no more innocent lives would be lost that night. Harry and Neville, at least, would survive. It was time for Voldemort to experience the evil of his own curse.

“Mamam?” said baby Harry, pulling at his mother's hair, not understanding what had happened, as he crouched over her face, looking into those unblinking, lifeless green eyes. Suddenly there was a loud bang. Harry looked around uncomprehendingly. The house was in flames.

Voldemort smiled, seemingly pleased with his handiwork. “Ha, ha, my little Potter,” laughed Voldemort cruelly. “Your parents are dead, your house is in flames. You're defenceless before me!”

“Mamam! Maman!” cried Harry plaintively, turning back to his lifeless mother. He knew something was wrong with her. He was becoming more and more upset as she continued to lie there, unmoving. Why wasn't she talking to him in her sweet comforting voice? Why wasn't she taking him in her arms and hugging him like she always did when he was upset. Why was she just lying there like that? Harry started crying over his dead mother.

Rick was overcome with grief as he watched the heart-breaking scene before him. Why didn't I do something to save them? he asked

himself. How could I have been so cold-hearted to let this terrible tragedy happen? But deep-down, despite the over-powering feelings of guilt, he knew there had been no choice, but to let these gruesome events unfold. But something else, other than his emotions, was troubling Rick. What would protect Harry when Voldemort turned his Killing Curse upon him? he wondered. Everything he had heard earlier that night made him doubt that the curse would rebound upon Voldemort, the way it was meant to – the way it had actually happened that night. Was it possible that Harry was not protected? Was it possible that Voldemort would succeed in killing him and retain all his powers? Rick felt increasingly confused and uneasy.

“Your mother can’t protect you now,” said Voldemort, staring with cold unfeeling eyes at the distraught baby. “It’s time for you to join her. Now, according to Pettigrew, she’s used some blood magic on you, so perhaps I had better be careful. She wanted me to kill her – that much is obvious. Probably, she needed me to kill her – to activate the protection. But what does it do, I wonder? Pettigrew said that I would not be able to touch you; but there’s no need to touch you to kill you with a curse, my little enemy,” he said thoughtfully, more to himself, than to Harry.

“I know – I’ll try putting my mark on you, first, little Potter. If I can do that, then I’ll certainly be able to kill you,” he said in a cold, heartless, calculating voice. Harry was looking up at Voldemort, as he spoke to him. Voldemort pointed his wand at Harry’s head and said “Signum Ego Concateno.”

Harry recoiled, writhing on the ground and screaming in agony from the excruciating pain. When he was still for a moment, Rick recognised the famous zigzag lightning-bolt shape on his forehead. For now, it was a bleeding wound – not yet a scar. But what does this mean? Rick asked himself. If Harry was protected, Voldemort wouldn’t have been able to mark him like that. Surely it means he won’t be protected from the Killing Curse either. Voldemort is going to kill him – unless I do something!

Rick knew he could cast a Reflecting Shield over Harry, which would not only protect him, but also send Voldemort’s curse back at him. Dumbledore kept warning me, over and over again to do nothing to

change the past, he reminded himself. But what if I was always here on this night? What if it was always my Reflecting Shield that saved Harry – not a protection from his mother as everyone has always thought? Then it would be OK for me to cast it – in fact, I have to, because I'll be changing the past if I don't!

It's so damn confusing, thought Rick. Maybe Lily really did succeed in putting a protection spell on Harry without realising it. Maybe it's not meant to protect him from Voldemort's mark – maybe it's only meant to protect him from mortal danger. Or maybe his mother's protection will only work after Voldemort's mark has been put on him – maybe that helps to activate it. Did Voldemort made a fatal mistake in putting his mark on Harry? Could it be that the mark itself will protect him? There are just too many possibilities, thought Rick desperately – time was running out. If I place a Reflecting Shield on Harry, it's going to double the strength of Voldemort's curse. It might end up killing him, rather than just destroying his body. That would really be changing the past. What am I going to do?

Voldemort drew himself up triumphantly to cast the Killing Curse, while Rick was still frantically trying to decide what to do. Yes, I have to protect him with a Reflecting Shield, he finally decided. But just as he was about to cast it, he hesitated. No, wait – what if I don't cast it. What if I just watch to see what happens? If Voldemort's curse kills Harry, instead of rebounding back on him, I can go back in time, a bit, to just before he does the curse and then cast the Reflecting Shield. That should work, shouldn't it?

Voldemort pointed his wand down at little Harry, who was lying curled up, crying in pain, in the foetal position – his little hands clutching at his forehead. "Avada Kedavra!" cried Voldemort victoriously.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 22 - Welcome to My Nightmare

Rick's mind went blank, except for the sound of two words that reverberated painfully through his consciousness ... Avada Kedavra, spoken in the cold, harsh, gloating voice of Voldemort. It seemed to go on forever, but probably it was only a few moments. As the last echo of those terrible words died away, Rick's senses began to function once more, discerning the world around him. He found himself alone, in the Potters' garden at Godric's Hollow.

But how can this be? Rick asked himself. It was no longer an autumn night. The garden was no longer tidy and well-kept. The Potters' house was no longer in flames. The midday sun was low in a wintry sky. The garden was an untended, unruly mass of weeds, and the cottage was in ruins. Both house and garden looked like they had been untouched for years. In fact, everything looked exactly the same to Rick, as it had when he Apparated here from Hogwarts. Rick searched his mind, but could not remember having deliberately tried to travel forward again in time. Yet it really seemed as though he had. The last thing he could remember was Voldemort's Killing Curse. Everything after that was a total blank.

It's not like I'm not used to living with huge blanks in my past, thought Rick uneasily. I just wish I knew what happened after Voldemort cursed Harry. That was the whole point of my being there. I better get back to Hogwarts and tell Dumbledore what happened. I wonder what he'll make of it.

Rick Apparated back to the Headmaster's study and immediately made himself visible. But the Headmaster wasn't there; nor was Harry or Hermione. Professor Snape was the only one in the room. He was standing with his back to Rick, lost in thought, looking out the window.

"Err, Professor Snape," said Rick, "Where's Professor Dumbledore and —" But Rick stopped. Snape spun around, reflexively drawing his wand as he moved into a defensive posture, the expression on his face, a mixture of surprise, incredulity, wariness, and hostility.

“Who the hell are you? Where in Hades did you come from?” demanded Snape dangerously. “How on earth did you manage to get into this locked and warded office? Stay perfectly still! Move as much as a muscle and you’ll be dead before you hit the ground!”

“Err ... Professor Snape,” began Rick. “What’s going —”

“I already know my own name,” said Snape, glaring intently at Rick. “What I wish to know is your name – and exactly what you are doing in my office!” he said threateningly.

“Your office?” Rick blurted out. “But this is Professor Dumbledore’s office – where is he?”

“I’ll ask the questions,” barked Snape. He appeared to be a little unsettled by Rick’s question. “Tell me your name and how you got into my office. Now!”

Rick was about to ask Snape why he was asking him his name, when he knew it perfectly well. But a quick probe of Snape’s mind told Rick that Snape was completely mystified as to who he was. Rick was starting to feel very uneasy. “My name is Rick Godfry, sir,” said Rick. “Err ... what’s the date today?”

Snape ignored Rick’s question. “How did you get into my office?!” he demanded.

“I Apparated, sir,” answered Rick.

“Don’t lie to me!” snarled Snape. “No one can Apparate at Hogwarts – tell me how you got into my office – now!”

Since Snape was refusing to answer him, Rick decided to get his answers straight from Snape’s mind. It was exactly the same day that he had Apparated from this office to Godric’s Hollow. But it was no longer Dumbledore’s office. Professor Severus Snape seemed to firmly believe that he, and not Professor Dumbledore, was the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. What have I done? Rick asked himself fearfully. Have I somehow changed everything?

Snape was becoming furious. He raised his wand, apparently intending to hex Rick. But suddenly Rick disappeared. "You see, I was telling you the truth about Apparating," said Rick from behind Snape. He had decided it would be easier just to demonstrate than argue.

Snape spun around, astonished, pointing his wand at Rick, but before he could curse him, Rick was back in front of the desk. "Impedimenta!" yelled Snape, after turning around again. Rick didn't bother to Apparate this time. He simply cast a Reflecting Shield, which turned Snape's curse back on him. Snape stood frozen.

Rick took the opportunity to try and sort out his confused thoughts. He sank into a comfortable armchair and tried to figure out what had happened. It was obvious now that somehow, he had changed time, and almost certainly not for the better. But he had done nothing! He followed Dumbledore's instructions to the letter. In the end, he changed nothing. He didn't cast his Reflecting Shield over Harry. Had Harry been killed? Did Voldemort get away unscathed? He had to find out, but Snape didn't seem to be in any mood to answer questions. Rick was certain Snape had changed sides and joined Dumbledore before that fateful Halloween night. He was just going to have to trust him – well, a little, at least.

"Err, Professor Snape, if you wouldn't mind just, err ... standing there quietly for a bit, I'd like to take the opportunity to, err ... explain where I've come from. You probably won't believe me at first, so it might be best if you just, err ... stay that way, till I'm finished." Rick decided to be selective about what he told Snape, just in case he had changed sides again.

"I'm a Hogwarts student, sir. A Gryffindor, as you can see from my uniform. I was in this very office this morning. But, you see, you weren't here. In fact, you weren't even the Headmaster. You were the Potions master. Professor Albus Dumbledore was the Headmaster and I was sitting in this room with him and two friends of mine, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. I have some rather unusual abilities, as you've just seen for yourself. One of them is the ability to travel in time Professor Dumbledore had asked me to go back in time,

to observe something. He told me most emphatically, not to change anything.

“I did exactly as he said, and was very careful not to change a thing. But somehow, it seems I have, because, when I Apparated back to his office, Professor Dumbledore, Harry, and Hermione were gone and you were here – apparently, the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Something has gone dreadfully wrong. Err ... by the way sir, I didn't curse you – err, just in case you were thinking I did. I'm rather good at putting up a Reflecting Shield, which turns your own curse back on you. You were hit by your own Impedimenta Curse. I'll lift it now. But I suggest you don't try cursing me again. Finite Incantatem.”

Snape remained frozen for a few moments as he stared wide-eyed at Rick, in disbelief. Finally, he shook his head violently and rushed to his desk, pulled open a drawer, and took out a bottle of Firewhisky. He didn't bother with a glass; he just threw back his head, taking two large gulps, to steady his nerves. Then he collapsed into his chair and closed his eyes, pressing a thumb and forefinger to them. After a minute or two, he opened his eyes, and took a small glass from the open drawer. He filled it with Firewhisky and downed it in a single gulp. Finally, he looked up at Rick, incredulously. “Did I hear you correctly? Did you say that one of the people in this office was Harry Potter?”

“Yes sir,” replied Rick. “Harry Potter, the son of James Potter and Lily Evans. I think you went to school —”

“But Harry Potter died, along with his parents, fifteen years ago!” said Snape emphatically.

Rick gulped – his worst fears had been realised. “In this reality, perhaps he did, but in the one I came from he didn't. Voldemort tried to kill him, but his curse rebounded, almost killing him, but not quite. It destroyed his body and he disappeared for fourteen years. His followers were defeated. Most of them ended up in Azkaban. Harry Potter became famous for causing Voldemort's downfall. He became known as The Boy who Lived.”

“But surely this is just some fantastic story you’ve invented – it can’t be true,” said Snape, shaking his head as he poured himself another Firewhisky. But Rick could see the doubt and uncertainty in Snape’s mind. He had to find a way of proving it to him.

“I don’t know what is and isn’t common knowledge in this reality sir, but since you’re Headmaster here, you probably wouldn’t expect me to know that you were once a Death Eater – but that you changed sides and were spying for Dumbledore. You warned him that one of the Potters’ friends was spying for Voldemort. It was Peter Pettigrew. I doubt very much many people in this reality would know that.”

Snape turned ashen-faced. There was not a person alive who knew his deepest, darkest, most dangerous secret – at least not until now. Snape quickly downed the glass of Firewhisky. He certainly wasn’t going to confirm the allegation. If it got out, he was worse than dead. For a moment he considered killing Godfrey. No – he’d killed enough in his Death Eater days – he’d turned his back on that. That aside, this Godfrey, or whoever he was, had a lot of power. It might not be so easy.

“If Harry died that night, in this reality, then what about Voldemort? What happened to him?” asked Rick, uneasily.

“In this reality,” replied Snape, in a flat emotionless voice, “he is called the Eternal Emperor. He is the absolute ruler of the magical world, and has plans to one day be ruler of the whole world.”

“What happened to Professor Dumbledore and Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Hagrid and all the other members of —” Rick stopped himself short, he knew nothing of Snape’s present loyalties – if he had any, apart from to his bottle of Firewhisky. He didn’t want to give away the name of anyone that Snape didn’t know about – they might still be alive.

“The Order of the Phoenix?” asked Snape. “All dead – and many more besides. Everyone who opposed the Dark Lord was ruthlessly murdered – after the Dementors had devoured their souls. All the Squibs, Muggle-born and half-blood witches and wizards were exterminated fifteen years ago, when the Dark Lord came to power.

Welcome to my Nightmare, Mr. Godfry,” said Snape, in a dull, lifeless voice, pouring himself another Firewhisky, and quickly downing it.

“Actually, Professor Snape, I think it’s my nightmare,” said Rick, feeling unbearably guilty. “I think I may have created it. You know how I told you that Professor Dumbledore sent me back in time? Well, he sent me back to the night that Voldemort killed the Potters. Like I said, in my reality, Voldemort’s curse rebounded on him. I was supposed to observe where it struck him. He has a protective cloak. It’s called the Cloak of —”

“Yes, yes, I know all about the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin. He goes on about it ad nauseam, as if it’s some blasted sacred relic,” spat Snape, impatiently.

“Since his rebounding curse destroyed his body,” continued Rick, “Professor Dumbledore thought it may have also damaged the cloak. I was just supposed to watch, and see where the curse hit him.”

“But you didn’t just watch, did you?” said Snape accusingly. “You broke the golden rule of Time Travel – you changed something – you blasted fool! You changed something which resulted in Voldemort surviving and creating this hell on earth! You are to blame for this nightmare!” he said angrily.

Rick hung his head. “Yes, I am to blame,” he sighed. “Not because I did something – but because I did nothing. You see, everyone believed that Lily Potter had found some ancient magic to protect Harry. She sacrificed her own life to save Harry’s and everyone believed that her sacrifice protected Harry from Voldemort’s Killing Curse and sent it back on him. But I was listening to the Potters talking before Voldemort arrived, and it was clear she hadn’t found a spell powerful enough to do that.”

“I began to wonder if maybe, it was my Reflecting Shield that had protected Harry. I mean, that I had always been there, because I had always gone back in time and done it ... if you see what I mean. But I kept remembering what Professor Dumbledore said about not changing time. In the end I didn’t know whether not changing time

meant doing nothing or doing something – casting the Reflecting Shield. Now I know!”

“I see,” said Snape, stroking his chin, and contemplating Rick’s dilemma and the terrible, but fascinating complexities of Time Travel.

“In the end,” said Rick, “I figured that if I did nothing and it turned out that I should have acted, then I could always go back again to before Voldemort cursed Harry and cast the Reflecting Shield. But something unexpected happened when Voldemort cast his Killing Curse, I was somehow thrown back to the present time. That’s why I Apparated back here, sir, I wanted to ask the Headmaster’s advice on what I should do.”

“Well, since I am now the Headmaster, I am more than willing to give you my advice,” said Snape. “Go back! Cast your Reflecting Shield! This reality, which, it seems, you have created, is an abomination! This,” he said, pointing to the half-empty bottle of Firewhisky, “is the only thing that makes life remotely tolerable. This once proud school is a mere shadow of what it was. Like the wizarding world at large, it has been decimated. Achievement and excellence count for naught! All that matters is blood – and where it places one in the social pecking order. Ability and intelligence are shunned, nepotism and cronyism determine success,” he said bitterly.

“After his glorious victory your great, immortal Emperor found himself presiding over a very small empire indeed. When the blood-letting was over and only the Purebloods were left, surprise, surprise – he discovered there was a Demographic Problem. Having killed most of the population, he was surprised to find that there were not enough people left to do the work and run things. There are less than half the number of students at this school now, than there were in my student days, and even then, it is almost impossible to find qualified teachers. All the old ones were killed – Purebloods included – their only crime was to have been appointed by Professor Dumbledore.”

“All of them?” asked Rick, alarmed.

“Yes, except for myself, Binns – who was already dead – Trelawney – whom the Immortal One regards as a Great Seer – and of course

Madam Hooch, or should I say, ex-Headmistress Hooch!" said Snape scornfully.

"What? You mean Madam Hooch, the flying instructor?" asked Rick, puzzled. "How did she get to be Headmistress? I wouldn't have thought that she was qualified."

"Oh, but you're mistaken," said Snape sarcastically. "She was eminently qualified to succeed Dumbledore as Headmistress. After all, she had, unbeknownst to myself, been the Dark Lord's longest serving spy at Hogwarts. Not to mention being part of the Magistocracy – a second cousin of Minister of Magic Parkinson, no less. What better qualification could there be for Headmistress of Hogwarts? In three short years, she almost totally destroyed this school. When her shortcomings became so glaringly obvious, that even the Minister of Magic noticed, she was elevated to Minister of Magical Games and Sports. It has been my unhappy task to be Headmaster of this declining school ever since. The only compensation in my appointment was that it allowed me to give up active Death Eater service."

"When the penny finally dropped, and our esteemed Emperor, in his infinite wisdom, realised there was a Demographic Problem, he decreed that there would be a breeding program – don't get me started on that insanity. It wasn't the obvious problems in the running the mundane affairs of the wizarding world, which troubled him. Such practical considerations never seem to cross his evil, twisted mind. No, what alarmed him was the realisation that the wizarding population was too small to carry out his cherished dream of exterminating the Muggles. This world is not only evil and cruel; it is also totally irrational and insane." Snape shook his head in disgust, before downing another glass of Firewhisky.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rick noticed a sudden movement over by one of the bookshelves. Was that a mouse disappearing behind it? he asked himself. Could it be? ... Yes, it was! Rick projected his magical map and immediately identified the spy. He jumped to his feet and used a Summoning Charm to pull it out from behind the bookcase, and bring it squeaking and clawing into his outstretched

hand. He managed to get a good grip around its back to prevent it from biting and scratching him in its frantic attempts to escape.

“Where on earth did that rat come from?” asked Snape, somewhat surprised.

“It’s no rat, sir,” replied Rick. It’s a spy. An Animagus, by the name of Peter Pettigrew.

“Pettigrew, an Animagus? Surely not!” said Snape in disbelief. “How could such an inept, bootlicking little sycophant as Pettigrew have mastered such advanced magic? However, if it’s true, and he’s been listening to my less than devotional ranting about the Eternal Emperor, I’ll have to do something about him.”

Rick cast a spell on the rat, forcing it to transform. He had to release it, as it started spinning around. As it hit the floor, a head began shooting upwards, followed by arms and legs. When the transformation was complete, standing before them was a short little man, with a pointed nose and small, watery eyes. He immediately drew his wand, only to find it disappear from his hand and end up in Rick’s. Rick flicked it at Pettigrew’s feet. Pettigrew found he couldn’t move – they were stuck fast to the floor.

“So, Pettigrew!” barked Snape, rising unsteadily to his feet and coming around to the front of his desk. “Who ordered you to spy on me?”

“S-s-spy? Me s-spy on you, S-s-severus?” he stuttered lamely. “I-I, wasn’t s-spying on you, I-I ... I...”

“You were what?” asked Snape menacingly. “I know – you were just looking for cheese ... you thought my office was a cheese shop, and you’d just pop in for a little Gruyere ... is that right, Ratty?”

“Y-yes, I mean n-no, I mean ...” spluttered Pettigrew, in fear.

“Who sent you?” demanded Snape, levelling his wand at the little wizard. “You have two seconds before I hit you with a Restricted Curse!”

"N-no, p-please," begged Pettigrew pathetically. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. It was Lucius Malfoy who sent me to s-spy on you. But it wasn't just you; it was all the Hogwarts staff. It was j-just a r-routine surveillance mission," he mumbled apologetically.

"My, my, Pettigrew, so you've joined Malfoy's Secret Security Service? You certainly have come up in the world – or perhaps it's the world that's gone down to your miserable level," said Snape derisively. "I'm going to have to dispose of you, little rodent. It would never do to have you report my treasonous remarks about our evil Emperor to his head of Secret Security, now would it?"

"S-s-severus," begged the fearful Pettigrew, "I-I'd n-never do that to you ... p-p-please d-don't k-kill me. I k-know, why d-don't you m-memory-charm me, s-so I c-can't remember w-what you said. P-please have m-mercy," Pettigrew pleaded, pathetically.

"I have no mercy," said Snape coldly. "Even if I memory-charm you, Malfoy will send you back again. I don't want any of Malfoy's ratty little spies sneaking about; informing him of everything I say and do. Anyway, Pettigrew, you deserve to die for what you did – betraying your friends to the Dark Lord. They were no friends of mine, but a Secret Keeper who betrays his secret to the enemy of those he has sworn to protect is the lowest of the low – and deserves to die," said Snape harshly, advancing threateningly on Pettigrew.

"Wait, Professor Snape," said Rick. As much as he hated the miserable traitor, he did not want to see him killed. "I know the perfect way to deal with him. Squibbus; Finite Incantatum. There, now you can move again – but you're a Squib. I wouldn't go rushing off to Malfoy, if I were you – I understand that Squibs get exterminated. Here, take your wand, try a spell or two," said Rick to the disbelieving Pettigrew. "How about something simple – like Wingardium Leviosa?"

"Wingardium Leviosa," said Pettigrew, pointing his wand at a scroll on a small table. But nothing happened. Frantically he tried several other simple spells, but they didn't work, either. "P-please, take off this terrible curse, p-please, I'll do anything you say," he begged pitifully.

"It can't be taken off – it's irreversible – and permanent. Even if I could take it off I wouldn't, you wretched traitor," spat Rick. "It's your just deserts for what you did to your friends. James, Lily and their baby Harry are all dead because of you. And as a result of your treachery, Voldemort triumphed and many, many more died, including your friends, Sirius and Remus. It's hard to believe that one miserable little rat, like you, could cause so much pain, suffering, and death. As a result of your actions, Squibs are ruthlessly murdered – well now you're a Squib – you can experience, first hand, the consequences of your own cowardly actions."

Snape, meanwhile, was leaning back on his desk for support. The excessive amount of Firewhisky he had imbibed made him unsteady on his feet. But more than that, he was stunned at Rick's Squibbus Curse. He knew how hard the Dark Lord, and others, had searched – unsuccessfully – for such a spell. It was clear this Rick Godfry was no ordinary wizard. He had unheard of powers.

"P-please," begged Pettigrew miserably, d-don't leave me as a S-Squib. "The Secret Security Service has special Squib detectors. They still check them, even though all the Squibs have been killed, because new ones are born – and immediately killed. They'll d-detect me and k-kill me. P-Please, do something," he pleaded.

"The Squibbus Curse is irreversible," said Rick. "Of course, I could turn you back into a rat – but you would remain a rat till the day you die." As much as he abhorred Pettigrew's treachery, he couldn't condemn him to death.

"Oh, yes, p-please, merciful boy, please turn me into a rat," begged Pettigrew pathetically. "I know how to survive as a rat. I'd rather live as rat than die as a man."

Snape snorted mockingly at Pettigrew. Rick gestured to Pettigrew with his hand, transforming him permanently into a rat, which quickly scurried away.

"I must remember to get myself a cat," said Snape, smirking wickedly, as he made his way unsteadily back to his chair. He started reaching for his bottle of Firewhisky, but then drew back his hand. Perhaps

he'd enough. "That's a most impressive curse you used on Pettigrew," said Snape. "You appear to have extraordinary powers. How exactly did you acquire them?"

Rick was, by now, fairly sure that Snape was not serving Voldemort. It was likely that he wasn't opposing him either, but in all likelihood, neither was anyone else. In this world, opposing Voldemort meant certain death. Snape just seemed to be trying to survive. He couldn't save the world, so he was just trying to save himself – with the help of his Firewhisky. Rick noticed how subdued and fatalistic, Snape had become, compared to the Snape he remembered – that fire, which often burned so maliciously and malevolently, seemed to have been extinguished. Perhaps it had been drowned by the Firewhisky. In any case, Snape was already aware that he had extraordinary powers, so there seemed little harm in explaining how they came about. Rick was not intending to hang around in this Nightmare Reality for much longer, anyway – he was planning to go back in time and set things right.

"Extraordinary," said Snape, when Rick finished his story. "You are uniquely equipped to help those opposed to the Dark Lord, in your reality, overcome him and prevent a Nightmare World like this one, from coming into being. I suggest you return to the time just prior to when Harry Potter was killed. From what you have said, it seems certain that it was your Reflecting Shield that sent the Dark Lord's curse back on him, penetrating his protective cloak, and destroying his body. By going back to that night and not casting the shield, you changed Time, and brought this terrible reality into being."

"I know that now. It was really stupid of me," said Rick. "Voldemort actually did a test before he used the Killing Curse, to check whether Harry was protected from his curses. He was able to put his mark on Harry. I should have known then, beyond doubt, that nothing would stop Voldemort's Killing Curse – but me."

"You say he put his mark on the Potter baby? How did he do it? What did this mark look like?" asked Snape curiously.

"He just pointed his wand at Harry's forehead and said *Signum Ego Concateno*," said Rick. "A zigzag-shaped wound appeared on the

baby's forehead. Harry Potter has a very distinctive scar of that shape on his forehead, to this day. It looks like a lightening bolt," explained Rick.

"Yes, I know what it looks like," said Snape, to Rick's surprise. "Harry Potter must have been the first one the Dark Lord marked in that way. It can only be put on infants. It is quite different from the Dark Mark he puts on his adult Death Eaters – although its purpose is somewhat similar – to bind the recipient to the one who made it. A year or two after his victory, the Dark Lord made a very interesting discovery about that particular mark. If one who is marked should kill the one who made the mark, then they will also die."

Rick gasped.

"For a couple of years, after this discovery, the Dark Lord put his mark on every infant on its first birthday," continued Snape, ignoring Rick's shocked reaction. "Being obsessed with his own immortality, he saw it as a way to deter attempts upon his life. For a while it looked like the wizarding world would be populated by wizards and witches with lightening bolt zigzags on their foreheads. Eventually, however, the Dark Lord discovered a rather unfortunate side effect. Those with the mark appeared to have some kind of mental link with him. He became fearful that it would give them access to his thoughts – so he had them all killed – every single child whom he had marked. Consequently, there is not a single third or fourth year student at Hogwarts – they were all killed," said Snape, shaking his head morosely.

"This is truly, a grotesque, Nightmare Reality," said Snape bitterly, knocking back another Firewhisky.

"Yes," agreed Rick. "This terrible reality should never have come into existence. I need to go back and set things right." As he spoke, Rick reached for his wand. He was surprised to discover it was not in the special thin wand pocket where he always kept it. He was sure he had returned it to the pocket, after going back in time at Godric's Hollow. He had not used it since. He searched every pocket – twice – becoming more and more frantic. "My wand, I can't find it anywhere – it's gone," he cried desperately, sinking down into a nearby chair.

“What? Gone?” asked Snape. “But you seem to be capable of wandless magic. What do you need a wand for? Anyway, there’s always Pettigrew’s wand, you could use that,” he said, pointing to where Pettigrew had dropped it, when he was transformed into a rat.

“I can do wandless magic. I only need a wand for one thing: Time Travel. But not just any wand, it needs to be my wand – the wand of Godric Gryffindor,” said Rick, dejectedly. “Without it, I can’t go back in time. I’m stuck here in this NightmareReality that I created, and I can’t go back and fix it,” he said forlornly.

“You had the wand of Godric Gryffindor?” asked Snape incredulously.

“Yes, Professor Dumbledore gave it to me. Wait —” said Rick, jumping up and dashing across the room to the Founders cabinet – it was empty. “Where are all the things that used to be in here?” asked Rick, turning to face Snape. “It used to have the sword of Godric Gryffindor and the Sorting Hat in it – along with the wand of Godric Gryffindor.”

Snape shrugged his shoulders. “Looted by Death Eaters I imagine – when they defeated Dumbledore and seized Hogwarts. Such valuable and powerful magical objects as those would have been handed over to the Dark Lord. In fact, as I recall, it was almost exactly at the time Hogwarts fell, that the Dark Lord began using a different wand. It’s an unusual colour, a very dark brown and it has something etched at one end.”

“That’s it!” said Rick, “Voldemort’s got the wand of Godric Gryffindor! But why would he want to use Gryffindor’s wand? I mean Gryffindor and Slytherin were enemies, and Voldemort believes that he’s the heir of Salazar Slytherin.”

“True,” agreed Snape. “However, that wand must be one of the most ancient in existence, and possibly the most powerful. The Dark Lord is obsessed with power and objects of power. He wouldn’t care whose wand it had been. Of course, he hasn’t announced that he’s using Gryffindor’s wand – he wouldn’t want that to get out. He hates Godric Gryffindor with a passion.”

“So that’s why my wand disappeared,” mused Rick. “When I didn’t stop Voldemort’s curse, reality changed. In this reality, I don’t have Gryffindor’s wand – because Voldemort’s got it. And, since I don’t have that wand in this reality, I wouldn’t have been able to travel back to the past, to that Halloween night. That’s why I inexplicably found myself back in the present time. I’ve got to get that wand back,” said Rick, determinedly.

“I have no idea how you’re going to do that,” said Snape. “You seem to know about the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin. But that’s not all the Dark Lord has protecting him. He has become completely obsessed with his own immortality – that, and exterminating the Muggles. He has a permanent guard of his most trusted Death Eaters protecting him, day and night. He has, in the past few years become even more paranoid and reclusive; he very rarely appears in public. Apart from the odd, increasingly irrational decree, he pretty much leaves the running of the wizarding world to his two hand-picked lieutenants: Cecil Parkinson, the Minister of Magic and Lucius Malfoy, Commander of the Death Eaters, the Secret Security Service and other, unknown secretive and evil organs of oppression.”

“I have to get close to him, there must be a way. Do you know where he is? I can Apparate right to him – magical Wards won’t stop me,” said Rick, keen to get on with it.

“No one knows where Voldemort is,” said Snape. “His whereabouts are a closely-guarded secret. He is rumoured to have several residences, which he moves between. As I said, he is totally paranoid about his immortality. In order to go to him, you must be issued with a special Portkey. There is only one way you can get close to him – you must become a Death Eater!”

“No!” gasped Rick, in horror.

“He still presides over the initiation ceremonies, and personally burns the Dark Mark into the arm of every new Death Eater. In order for the mark to bind his Death Eaters to himself, he must make the Dark Mark himself. There is no other way for you to get close to him – of that I am quite certain,” said Snape.

Rick gulped. "So how do I become a Death Eater, then?" asked Rick, shuddering at the thought.

"Like almost everything else in this corrupt world, it depends on who you know. Without patronage, it could take you years. That's how everything works here, he said bitterly. However, in the case of joining the Death Eaters, since you're not in the Magistocracy, you will also need to demonstrate exceptional magical power. That shouldn't be a problem for you."

"Wait a moment," said Snape. He pulled open a drawer and took out a small vial containing a purple liquid. He uncorked it and downed it in a single gulp. "Sobriety Potion," he explained. "I don't have much use for it these days – it tends to defeat the whole purpose of the Firewhisky. However, I need to give some careful thought to how we are going to get you close enough to the Dark Lord to get that wand back, and end this Nightmare."

"You will have to pose as an exchange student. I think I can fabricate the necessary papers. We will say that you are from New Zealand – as you did in your reality – and, because there are no magical schools there, your parents instructed you at home, but decided to send you to Hogwarts to complete your education. I presume that with all your gifts, you will do well academically – in fact you will probably find your studies ridiculously easy. Sixth-year is probably the academic equivalent of fourth-year in my student days. So we should be able to get away with putting you in Ravenclaw."

"But what about the Sorting Hat?" asked Rick. "Doesn't it decide my house? I was hoping to be in Gryffindor," said Rick quickly.

"That won't be possible," replied Snape. "The Dark Lord abolished Gryffindor House when he came to power, along with the sorting ceremony. Students are allocated a house based upon two ridiculous rules. If their family is classified as belonging to the Magistocracy in 'Parkinson's Pureblood Genealogy', they automatically go into Slytherin. Otherwise, they sit a test of magical and academic ability. Those above a certain threshold go into Ravenclaw. Those who fail to attain the threshold – the majority – go into Hufflepuff. The house

to which you are assigned determines your prospects and your future in the wizarding world. However, I do not wish to go into all of that now – it is far too depressing – especially when I'm sober."

"But wouldn't I need to be in Slytherin to become a Death Eater?" asked Rick.

"No, not at all," said Snape. "By and large, the Magistocracy do very little, except strut about like a bunch of prize peacocks admiring themselves. They contribute very little to the wizarding world in real terms. Of course they are the heads of all the Ministry departments, and form the top echelons of the various security services. Many join the Death Eaters, mainly for the prestige it brings. Naturally, they fill all the top positions. In short, they are the political and managerial elite – they do virtually nothing. The real work is done by those from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Hufflepuffs leave school after fifth year and do all the menial jobs. Ravenclaws make up the bulk of the security services, although not the highest ranks. They also fill the middle management positions at the Ministry, run businesses and so on. If they are magically powerful, they may also be invited to become Death Eaters."

"You were saying something about needing patronage, before," said Rick.

"Yes. Only a few students each year are invited to become Death Eaters," explained Snape. "Due to its association with the Dark Lord, it is very prestigious, and competition is fierce. In order to receive an invitation, you will need to impress the Dark Arts and Duelling Professor, Barty Crouch, with your magical abilities."

"Barty Crouch junior?" asked Rick, remembering how he had impersonated Mad-Eye Moody in his reality.

"Yes," said Snape, distastefully. It was obvious that he loathed Barty Crouch. "However, Crouch's recommendation will not be enough. We live in a Magistocracy not a meritocracy. It's who you know, not what you know that counts in this world. You have the son and daughter of the two highest-ranking families in the Magistocracy in your year, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. You will need to cultivate one or

the other. Otherwise, you might have to wait years to receive your invitation.”

Rick groaned.

“I suppose you must know them,” said Snape. “You would have gone to school with them in your reality. I doubt you will find that the depraved values and the pampering and privilege they have experienced all their lives in this reality have improved them – on the contrary.... But you will need to get one of them on side, to ask their father to give you the nod. That’s how it works.”

“How soon could I be initiated as a Death Eater, sir?” asked Rick. The more he heard about this terrible world – which he had created – the more desperate he became to get out of it, by returning the world to the way it was supposed to be.

“There are two induction ceremonies each year, at the equinoxes. The March Equinox is in four weeks. You should be old enough. In fact, if I am not mistaken, both Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson are to be inducted at that time. If you move quickly, you may be able to join them.”

“Four weeks. You mean I’m going to have to live in this horrible Nightmare for four weeks?” muttered Rick, dejectedly.

“I have lived in this Nightmare for fifteen years,” spat Snape, bitterly. “I shall do everything in my power to help you end it, but it will have to be done surreptitiously, behind the scenes. I do not wish to have my part in assisting you to obtain the Dark Lord’s wand exposed. After all, you may fail to get the wand. Or, you may obtain it, but not succeed in your attempt to turn this terrible reality back to the one from which you came. Should you fail, I shall be condemned to live out my life in this Nightmare. Unless you have urgent need of my assistance, it will be safer, for us both, if you do not visit my office again. As you have seen for yourself, there are spies everywhere.”

Snape pointed his wand at Rick. “Please remove your Reflecting Shield, Mr. Godfry. It is you, who needs to become a Ravenclaw, not I.” He muttered a spell and Rick’s tie and other Gryffindor insignia

changed to those of Ravenclaw house. "I'll dig up some clothes and books for you, from the Lost Property dungeon. There's probably even a trunk down there to put them in. I'll have a house-elf bring it to your dormitory. Take Pettigrew's wand – you'll need to pretend you're using it. I'll introduce you to your Head of House and have him show you to Ravenclaw Tower. Do try to make a good impression on him."

Rick couldn't help but reflect on the irony of the situation. In this reality, he and Snape trusted each other as allies and confidants. They were each in possession of the other's darkest secrets. They had the power to destroy the other, but instead they were protecting each other and working together for a common cause.

Snape rose to his feet and strode across to the fireplace. Taking a handful of powder from a porcelain dish on the mantelpiece, he threw it in the fire, and, as the flames flared up, he called, "Barty Crouch!"

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 23 - The Breeding-Mad Magistocracy

As Professor Barty Crouch junior accompanied him from the Headmaster's office to Ravenclaw Tower, Rick found himself instinctively disliking him – although he was careful to hide it. Crouch was a wiry, pale-skinned wizard with a hard, cold, freckly face and fair hair. There was an air of malice and ruthlessness about him. Rick wondered how much of it was his natural pre-disposition, and how much was the result of all the evil deeds he had done as one of Voldemort's Death Eaters.

As they walked through the corridors, Crouch conducted an impromptu interrogation. First he tested Rick's suitability to be in Ravenclaw. Satisfied with Rick's magical knowledge, he asked about his background. Having probed Crouch's mind, Rick realised that Crouch knew nothing about the magical community in New Zealand, so he was able to invent plausible answers to his questions, neatly avoiding the cunning traps he saw Crouch setting for him.

Crouch asked him what he planned to do when he finished school. Rick said he wasn't sure yet. He said he was thinking about further studies and, perhaps, eventually teaching. He didn't want to appear eager to become a Death Eater. He decided to adopt a bookish guise – someone more interested in knowledge than power and politics. He hoped it might make people view him with less suspicion, and not as potentially dangerous. He'd let Crouch come up with the idea of him becoming a Death Eater. He'd allow himself to be persuaded.

"Nagini," said Crouch, stopping before a huge oak door. The door swung outwards and Crouch entered a large room, motioning Rick to follow him. The Ravenclaw common room looked more like a library, with large bookshelves covering two of the walls. There were several comfortable-looking couches and armchairs around a blazing fire, but most of the room was given over to study tables, adding to the library-like atmosphere.

"Weasley!" called Crouch to a redheaded boy, pouring over a book at one of the desks. "Come here." Rick had to struggle to suppress a smile and his great happiness, as he recognised the familiar face of Ron Weasley. "Weasley, this is Godfrey," said Crouch. "He's a new

sixth-year student. He'll be in your dormitory. Take him up and show him around, will you?"

"Yes, Professor, certainly," said Ron in a dull, obedient voice. Crouch turned and left, without another word. "Follow me," said Ron in a neutral tone. There were quite a few students in the common room, as it was a Saturday afternoon. Most of them seemed to be studying. While Crouch was present, they had ignored Rick; but now he had left, some of them looked up at him, briefly, with guarded looks that gave nothing away. There was an atmosphere of wariness and suspicion, which you could almost cut with a knife. Rick noted that the layout of Ravenclaw Tower was quite similar to Gryffindor Tower, as Ron led him to the sixth-year boys' dormitory.

There were six beds in the dormitory, but only three of them looked occupied. "So who are the others in the dormitory besides you?" asked Rick, trying to engage Ron in friendly conversation. "Terry Boot and Theodore Nott," replied Ron, dully. "Those are ours," he said, flatly, indicating three of the beds. "Take your pick from the rest," he added, turning to leave.

"Err, R- ... Weasley," said Rick. He's almost said Ron's first name before catching himself. Crouch hadn't said it, and he wasn't supposed to know it. "So which subjects are you taking?" he asked, trying to be friendly.

"Just the standard ones, like everyone else," replied Ron quickly, without turning, before he exited the dormitory.

Rick picked a bed and lay down despondently. He contrasted his present depressed emotions with those of the happiness and euphoria he had felt, just a few months earlier, when he lay down for the first time on his bed in the Gryffindor sixth-year boys' dormitory. But it wasn't just a different dormitory; it was an entirely different world.

He was shocked at how different Ron was in this world. His Legilimency abilities had revealed the true depth of the differences. Ron was full of fear and suspicion, he wasn't about to trust Rick – or anyone else, for that matter. They could be spies, working for one of

the Wizarding state's secret surveillance organisations. Or they might just be stupid and careless, wanting to mouth off about all the terrible things that were wrong in their world. Ron knew, as well as anyone, all the things that were wrong, but he knew better than to talk about it – if he wanted to survive. There were spies everywhere, not to mention other magical surveillance devices. If you wanted to survive in this world, you kept your head down and your mouth shut – and you trusted no one.

Rick decided to take a walk around the lake. He could pretend, for a while at least, that this was the wonderful Hogwarts of his own world. Maybe that would lift his spirits a little. Students he passed looked up at him curiously, but then immediately averted their eyes. No one was taking any risks.

He recognised quite a few people, like Theodore Nott and Daphne Greengrass, both sixth-year Slytherins in his old reality. From her Slytherin uniform, Rick could tell that Daphne's family were part the Magistocracy. But Nott's family obviously weren't, as he was a Ravenclaw. Rick wondered how many Slytherins from his old reality had missed the cut in this one, and been relegated to Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff.

Then he began wondering about the Gryffindors. He thought about his dorm-mates. Ron, of course, was in Ravenclaw. Harry and Neville had been killed when they were a year old. Seamus was from a mixed-blood family, so he probably suffered the same fate, along with his family, thought Rick, shaking his head sadly. Dean Thomas, he recalled, was from a Muggle family. Rick wondered what this evil wizarding world did about Muggle-born witches and wizards. Do they seek them out and kill them – or are they left alone, to occasionally perform accidental magic? he wondered.

Rick's thoughts gravitated to Hermione. Was she alive in this world? If she was, what would she be doing? What would she be like? With all that had happened over the past few hours, Rick hadn't thought about Hermione. But now he did; and his heart ached for her. Not the Hermione of this world, if there was one, but the Hermione of his world – his Hermione. Despite his plans to get his wand back and end this loathsome reality, it was all becoming more and more distant.

The present terrible reality was becoming more real and solid in his mind. His old reality seemed so far away – and so too, did his Hermione.

How was he going to find out what happened to the Muggle-born witches and wizards if everyone was too frightened to talk? How was he going to find out anything? Lost in his unhappy thoughts, Rick left the path which ran around the lake, and headed for the Forbidden Forest. As he entered it, he spotted some red hair, protruding from behind a large tree. Walking around the tree, he found Ginny Weasley, leaning against the trunk, her head in her arms, crying.

“Excuse me,” he said softly. “What’s the matter? Why are you crying?” Ginny looked up at Rick, startled; she thought she was well-hidden, she hadn’t expected anyone to come upon her. She stayed silent, looking down at the ground. “Err ... allow me to introduce myself, I’m Rick Godfry. I’m a new sixth-year Ravenclaw student.” But Ginny remained silent.

Rick decided to use his charm – perhaps he could get her to trust him. If she told him what was troubling her, he might even be able to help – and, he might be able to learn something about this strange, cruel world.

“You can trust me,” he said to her gently. When she looked up at him, he managed to hold her gaze. “I’m from New Zealand, there’s no real wizarding community over there, so all of this is new to me. I just want to find out how things work around here, but no one seems to want to talk, or be friendly. So, err ... what’s your name?”

“Ginny Weasley,” she said in a subdued voice, as she quickly wiped away her tears.

“Judging from your name and red hair, you must be related to Ron. We’re in the same dormitory. Is he your brother?” asked Rick.

“Yes,” said Ginny sadly, looking away. She wasn’t very talkative.

“I see you’re in Ravenclaw as well. Which year are you in?” asked Rick.

“My fifth ... and final year,” blurted Ginny, starting to cry once more.

“Ginny, what’s the matter? Why is it your final year at Hogwarts? Why are you crying?” asked Rick, sending comforting feelings towards her.

Ginny wiped her eyes again, and looked up at Rick. She seemed to be weighing things up in her mind. Rick realised that she wanted to confide in him, but she had been brought up to trust no one. Hogwarts, she knew, was full of spies, and you never knew who might report something you said, back to the Secret Security Service. But she really liked Rick, and felt she could trust him. Finally, she said, “I don’t know why I’m talking to you, my mother warned me never to trust anyone outside of the family....” she said, trailing off. “I’m so depressed right now; I really don’t care what happens to me. Maybe a quick painful death would be better than a long painful life,” she added, bitterly.

“Ginny, I give you a Wizard’s Oath that I won’t betray your trust,” said Rick.

“A fat lot of good that will do,” said Ginny. “They have ways of breaking a Wizard’s Oath ... and everything else that is decent and honourable. You really have no idea what it’s like here, do you?”

Rick shook his head slowly. “No, none whatsoever – I was hoping that you might tell me. But I do know a lot of magic.” Drawing his wand, he cast an Imperturbable Charm and a Wizard Repelling Charm around them “That was so we can’t be overheard, or noticed – just in case anyone should come this way.”

Ginny realised that Rick must be a very powerful wizard, and it made her uneasy. Powerful wizards usually ended up becoming Death Eaters, or members of the Secret Security Service. But, deep inside, she felt there was something honest and trustworthy about this wizard, he seemed so unlike all those evil, dark wizards.

“Do you know anything about the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program?” asked Ginny, spitting out the words with loathing. Rick shook his head. Ginny took a deep breath to steady herself, and

continued. "It all began about thirteen years ago, back in 1984. A few years earlier, when the war was over, all the enemies of the Eternal Emperor were killed: The Squibs, Muggle-borns and all of the mixed-blood witches and wizards. They were all put to death – in the most gruesome ways imaginable," she added with a shudder. "All the Purebloods who had opposed the Eternal Emperor were also killed," she added, as a tear ran down her cheek.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, if it's painful to talk —"

"Many Pureblood witches and wizards died in the fighting – on both sides. My father was one of them," Ginny continued, sobbing as she spoke. "I was less than a year old at the time, I don't even remember him. I just know how hard it's been for my poor mother. She was heartbroken when my father died, and she had to raise seven of us, all by herself." Ginny dried her eyes – determined not to cry anymore.

"When all the killing was over, the population of the wizarding world was only a fraction of what it had been before the war. There weren't enough witches and wizards to do the work and keep things running, or to conquer the Muggles which is the Eternal Emperor's Great Plan. So they decided they needed a breeding program. Not just to restore the wizarding world to its previous numbers, but to greatly exceed them. The Eternal Emperor's Great Plan is to kill all the Muggles and have witches and wizards populate the entire world. The aim of the breeding program is to ultimately increase the wizarding population by a thousand-fold."

"What?" gasped Rick. "But surely that will take thousands of years?"

"The longer, the better," muttered Ginny, under her breath. "The idea isn't just to increase the population, though – it's to purify it," she said darkly.

"Purify it?" asked Rick, "How do you mean?"

"Well, according to what they teach us in Social Conformity and Obedience classes, few, if any, of the present-day Pureblood families have one hundred percent pure wizarding blood. They went back through all the ancient records and created a complete genealogy of

the surviving wizarding families, ranking them according to the purity of their bloodlines. It's all documented in a book called 'Parkinson's Pureblood Genealogy'. The ten percent of families with the purest blood are called the Magistocracy. Of course, families like mine, who fought against the Eternal Emperor, are excluded from the Magistocracy, even if their blood is pure enough. There are also rumours that some wealthy families bought their way into the Magistocracy, and that the rankings have more to do with gold, than purity of blood. Gold is more important here, than truth," said Ginny, with disgust. Coming from an impoverished background, it was something she understood, all too well.

"When they turn eleven, and come to Hogwarts, the children of the Magistocracy automatically go into Slytherin," continued Ginny. "Only males of the Magistocracy are allowed to breed, all other wizards are magically sterilized."

Rick gulped. Are they planning on sterilizing me? he wondered. "But hang on," he said. "How is that going to help the population to increase?"

"Wizards of the Magistocracy must marry a witch from the Magistocracy as soon as they finish school. Neither witch nor wizard has any choice in who they marry. It's all decided by their families, based upon how pure their blood is. They have to have at least five children, but preferably twice that number. In addition, the wizards have to keep a minimum of ten concubines, for breeding. Some of the very wealthy ones, like Lucius Malfoy, have over a hundred. The concubines are kept continuously producing children," said Ginny, her voice trembling.

"What? That's appalling!" said Rick, horrified. "Do the witches have any choice in the matter?"

"Of course not," spat Ginny. "Most of the new students, who come to Hogwarts each year, get put in Hufflepuff. The brightest and most magical, go to Ravenclaw. Slytherin witches and wizards all stay at Hogwarts until seventh-year – no matter how thick they are. Hufflepuffs leave after fifth-year. The wizards are put to work in

menial jobs. The witches are all forced to become concubines and start having babies immediately.”

“That’s terrible,” gasped Rick, shocked at the cruelty and inhumanity of this world. “What about the Ravenclaws?”

“The wizards stay until seventh year, and then they either join the Secret Security Service, work for the Ministry of Magic or work in trade and commerce. Most of the witches are forced to leave school after fifth-year, to become concubines, like the Hufflepuff witches. But those who do especially well in their exams are allowed to remain at school until seventh year. Then, they become concubines,” said Ginny, despondently.

“What’s the point of the extra two years of school then?” asked Rick, feeling disgusted at the callous evil of this world.

“After ten or fifteen years, when they are too old or unable to bear more children or no longer attractive, the wizards throw out their old concubines and replace them with young ones, just out of school. The ex-concubines are forbidden to contact their children or have anything to do with them. The children belong to the wizards; they’re not raised by their natural mothers or even allowed to know who they are. So the ex-concubines need to work, in order to survive. If you were a top Ravenclaw witch who did sixth and seventh year, you might be able to get a better job, such as teaching, or working at the Ministry of Magic. Otherwise, only menial jobs, such as raising the broods of the wizards of the Magistocracy, are available to you.”

Rick was aghast. He expected a world ruled by Voldemort to be brutal and cruel – but never, could he have imagined anything as completely callous and inhumane as this. “It’s too horrible to contemplate,” he said, shuddering in disgust.

“I know,” moaned Ginny. “The reason I was crying when you found me, is because I’m afraid that I’m not going to do well enough in my exams to stay on at Hogwarts, next year. In the end, it doesn’t make much difference ... it just forestalls the inevitable by two years.... Just think, this time next year I’ll probably be the concubine of some horrible old wizard who beats me and treats me like his slave. The

only sunshine in my life will be when my babies are born – but as soon as they're a few weeks old, they'll be taken away from me, and I'll never see them again." Despite her best intentions, Ginny began crying again.

Rick got up from where he was sitting and sat down next to Ginny, gently putting his arm around her, and sending her comforting feelings. He had no idea what to say to Ginny. He had no words to console her. He was now even more determined than ever to end this obscene reality, but he couldn't tell Ginny that. So he just comforted her until she stopped crying. "So do the children of the concubines become part of the Magistocracy?" asked Rick.

"No, only the children of their Pureblood wives are part of the Magistocracy. The children of concubines go into Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, and the young witches will, themselves, become concubines when they leave school. After seven generations, the blood of those who are not in the Magistocracy, will be ninety-nine percent Magistocracy blood. They will never be allowed to join the Magistocracy, but their blood will be purified."

"There is also a hierarchy in the Magistocracy," said Ginny, disdainfully. "Those at the top, like the Malfoys and Parkinsons are considered the elite. They get first pick of the witches leaving Hogwarts, each year. They prefer Ravenclaw witches, so that their offspring will be more intelligent and magically-powerful. When I leave Hogwarts, I will probably be chosen as the concubine of Lucius Malfoy or Cecil Parkinson – I don't know which one of them I loathe the most," she said, cringing with revulsion.

"What about Vol — err, the Eternal Emperor?" asked Rick. "How many concubines does he have? Surely he must want to produce heirs."

"Heirs? Why on earth would he want heirs?" asked Ginny. "He's supposed to be immortal. As far as I know, he has no wife, concubines, or children."

“No, I guess not,” said Rick, musing. “If he believes that he’s immortal, he wouldn’t want any heirs. They would only be a threat to his imperial throne – and his precious immortality!”

Rick began thinking out loud about the mathematics of the breeding program. “Wizards can sire children to well past the age of one hundred, with the aid of potions and spells. They might be able to breed for a hundred years, after leaving school. That means the elite ones, who can afford a hundred concubines, could father ten thousand children in their lifetime – it’s staggering. Half the wizarding world will be Malfoys and Parkinsons!” said Rick, appalled at the thought of it.

“That’s right,” said Ginny. “In fact, that’s exactly what’s intended. Except that the children born to their concubines do not take their name, exactly. They are called sib-Whatever. Sib stands for sired by. When you are in the Great Hall at mealtimes, you will notice that most of the students are first-years. They are the first wave of the children of concubines to enter Hogwarts. All the first-years, except for a handful of Slytherins, are sibs, since all other wizards were sterilized thirteen years ago. There are heaps of sib-Malfoys and sib-Parkinsons. And they all look so alike, it’s eerie. They’re a miserable bunch as well – just observe the ones in Ravenclaw, some time. They never knew their mothers; and their fathers have absolutely nothing to do with them. They’ve never known what it feels like to be loved. They’re raised in special institutions, with the children of other wizards. I suppose it’s something like the worst kind of Muggle orphanage,” she said, sighing sadly and shaking her head.

“Err, Ginny,” said Rick. “I heard that Squibs are killed as soon as they’re born. But what about magical children who are born to Muggles? Do you know what happens to them?”

“You’re right about the Squibs,” answered Ginny. “You wouldn’t expect many Squibs to be born now, given that their fathers are from the Magistocracy and have the purest blood. But I’ve heard that the percentage of Squibs has actually gone up, not down. There have also been more than a few witches of the Magistocracy giving birth to Squibs – although it’s all hushed up, of course. It makes you wonder how pure the Magistocracy really is. But I don’t think they bother

about magical children born to Muggles. They don't have the manpower to find them and deal with them. And anyway, they pose no threat. They'll eventually be killed, along with all the other Muggles, I suppose, when the Eternal Emperor finally carries out his Great Plan," said Ginny, shuddering at the thought.

Rick couldn't think of anything comforting to say to Ginny. This world was a nightmare, just as Snape had said. The only thing to do was to put an end to it, as quickly as possible. There wasn't much he could do for the miserable Ginny in this terrible reality. His heart went out to her, but all he could do was send her comforting feelings.

Ginny, meanwhile, was beginning to develop a rather large crush on Rick. The strange and unfamiliar emotions were wonderful ... but also, unsettling. Romance was a luxury in this world, the prerogative of the Magistocracy. It was something she had never experienced – nor expected to experience. She found herself inexplicably attracted to this charming wizard. He had somehow penetrated the protective shell she had learned to hide behind ... and touched her heart, with his warmth and sincerity.

Ginny looked up at Rick, who, noticing the strange look she was giving him, quickly probed her mind. Ginny's romantic feelings towards him became immediately obvious. Rick had been using his charm liberally, to gain her confidence, but clearly there were some unexpected side-effects – which he should have foreseen. Rick began thinking frantically of a way out of the situation he had got himself into, without hurting Ginny. She already had more than enough pain and suffering in her life.

"Err ... Ginny," said Rick. "Err ... I really like you, you're a really lovely witch ... but, err ... the thing is, you see, err ... I have a girlfriend, back home and ... well ... I'm sorry, but ... I'd really like to be your friend, if you'd let me."

Ginny gave a sad, disappointed smile and looked downwards. She was all too used to life disappointing her. She knew better than to expect happiness from this world. "It's OK, I understand," she sighed sadly. "I'd like to be your friend, Rick, but it wouldn't be a good idea to be open about it. There are spies everywhere, and the authorities

discourage friendship. Our allegiance is supposed to be exclusively to the Eternal Emperor, and the Magistocracy. Friendship between witches, who will become someone's concubine, and wizards, is particularly discouraged. So please be discrete."

Ginny sombrely rose to her feet; brushing some leaves and twigs from her robes. "I should really get going – I have heaps of homework to do. Please wait a few minutes, before coming out of the forest, someone may be watching. You really have to be very careful around here," she said, smiling sadly at him, before walking off towards the castle.

Rick felt terribly sad for Ginny. Just like the Ginny his old reality, she was a lovely person. But in this world she had no hope of happiness; she had nothing to look forward to but suffering and misery.... Rick sat lost in thought, trying to process all the terrible information he had learnt from Ginny. The more he got to know this world, the more he hated it.

Rick contrasted this world with the little he knew of the future world of the year 2000, which he had visited with Harry. Voldemort was the undisputed master of both worlds. His enemies, plus all the Squibs and Muggle-born witches and wizards had been killed in both. But in this world, the mixed-blood witches and wizards had also been killed, not just enslaved. This world seemed better organised, and more insidious, with its Magistocracy and its Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program. Although Rick didn't know as much about the future world of the year 2000, on the face of it, the two regimes were quite different. He wondered why that was.

Maybe it was because Voldemort had ruled this world for fifteen years, whereas he had only ruled the future world of 2000 for three. Perhaps it was because this Voldemort had not suffered the dissolution of his body and the years of suffering, before the creation of a new one, in the graveyard at Little Hangleton. Perhaps it was because this Voldemort had destroyed Harry Potter as a baby and laid the Prophecy to rest, whereas the Prophecy still hung over the Voldemort of the future, who seemed obsessed with fear that Harry Potter would one day rob him of his precious immortality.

Rick's musing was interrupted by something moving on the ground. A large beetle crawled out from under the leaves at the base of the tree Ginny had been leaning against, and took flight.

Could it be another Animagus spy? Rick asked himself. He closed his eyes and projected a magical map of the vicinity – a name jumped out at him: Rita Skeeter. It was obvious from her trajectory that she was heading for Hogsmeade, to transform and Apparate – and, almost certainly, to report on Rick's conversation with Ginny. She had been well within the area enclosed by his Imperturbable Charm – she would have heard everything. She was already too far away for him to catch with a Summoning Charm. What could he do? He had to stop her. If she made it back to her handlers in the Secret Security Service, with her scoop, Rick's plans for getting his wand back from Voldemort and ending this awful reality would be dashed – and Ginny Weasley was as good as dead!

Rick transformed into a Peregrine Falcon and headed off at top speed in the direction Rita had taken. With his powerful falcon's eyesight, he soon spotted her. He pulled in his wings and dived, neatly plucking the beetle out of the air with his powerful beak. Immediately, he soared up into the air, to discourage Rita from trying to escape from him, by transforming. If she did, she would plummet fifty metres to her death. Rick flew, with the beetle in his beak, into the Forbidden Forest, coming down in a small clearing.

Hopping onto one foot he gripped the beetle in the claws of his other foot before transforming. Then he lifted his foot, and cast a spell on the beetle, forcing it to transform, immediately hitting the witch, who appeared before him, with an Immobulus Jinx.

Standing before Rick, like a gaudy statue, was a furious blonde witch, dressed in garish purple robes, and wearing jewelled spectacles. She was heavy-jawed, with thickly-pencilled eyebrows; her hard face caked in thick make-up. She looked decidedly out of place, amongst the subdued harmony of greens and browns of the forest.

Rick plucked the wand from her hand, which was adorned with lethal crimson-painted, two-inch long fingernails, and probed her mind. As he had expected, she was spying for Lucius Malfoy. It seemed that

Voldemort had no use for a free press, or reporters. Rita's flamboyant writing style wasn't at all suited to state propaganda, which was the total content of the tightly-controlled wizarding media. So she had drawn on her Animagus skills to launch a successful career as a spy for the Secret Security Service.

Rick probed her mind for anything she might know about other spies operating at Hogwarts, but it seemed that she knew very little, apart from the names of a few informers, which he carefully noted. Rick decided to deal with her the same way as he had dealt with Peter Pettigrew. "Squibbus, Finite Incantatum," he said, throwing her wand back to her.

"Crucio!" she screamed viciously. Rick just grinned at her. "Crucio!" she snarled again.

"Squibs can't cast spells, Rita," said Rick. "You're wasting your time. I just turned you into Squib – permanently. Go on, try casting some more spells – or transforming back into a beetle – I think you'll find you can't."

Rita tried every nasty spell she could think of, but nothing worked; and she couldn't transform, either. She glared at Rick hatefully – then she lunged at him with her deadly fingernails. Rick threw up a barrier, which she hit so hard, she was knocked to the ground. As she lay, red-faced and winded, amongst the fallen leaves on the forest floor, she glared up at Rick with an expression of unmitigated malevolence.

Rick was surprised that she was keeping silent; it didn't seem her style, he had expected a torrent of abuse. He probed her mind again.

She was furious at what Rick had done to her – turning her into a detestable Squib. She was seething with anger and hatred, and determined, at all costs, to get even with him. That was why she was keeping quiet. If she spoke, she would betray her vengeful intentions, and – she believed – be killed, before she could take her revenge.

Unlike others, whom Rick had Squibbed, Rita's immediate reaction was not one of fear, depression, and despair; it was one of unfettered fury and vindictiveness. All she could think about for the moment was

vengeance. She was planning to go to Lucius Malfoy and report the conversation she had overheard between Rick and Ginny. She was going to tell him about all of Rick's dangerous powers. She knew she'd be put death as a Squib, but she didn't care. She didn't want to live as a loathsome Squib anyway – but most of all, she wanted to destroy this beastly wizard, who had reduced her to this.

“So, you're planning to go to Malfoy, even though you know it means certain death for you?” asked Rick. “I'm sorry, Rita, but I can't allow it. I'll have to turn you into a beetle – permanently. I think you'll find this forest a rather pleasant place, to live. Goodbye, Rita.”

“You bloody little —” But she never finished her curse, because Rick had transformed her into a beetle. It was a perfectly normal beetle. It knew nothing about having been a witch named Rita Skeeter. It didn't try to attack Rick, or to bite him. It just opened its wings and flew off, apparently quite content with its lot.

Chapter 24 - Social Conformity and Obedience

When Rick entered the Great Hall, the first thing he noticed was that there were only three tables. The Gryffindor table was gone. He made his way to the Ravenclaw table and sat down for the evening meal. The Slytherin table, he noticed, had been shortened, as it needed to accommodate fewer than twenty students. There were about forty students at the Ravenclaw table, and it was obvious that over half of them were first-years. The Hufflepuff table was the most crowded, with at least a hundred students – the majority of whom also looked to be first-years.

Rick noticed that the Slytherin table was quite different from the others. It was covered with an elegant tablecloth and lit with ornate candelabra. It was laid out with a silver-service and crystal-ware. Rather than appearing magically, the food was served by a host of obsequious house-elves. The children of the Magistocracy appeared to be enjoying a feast, while the rest of the students – and the teachers at the staff table – were eating a rather mundane meal. Rick had learned the names of some of the student informants from his probe of Rita Skeeter's vitriolic mind. Theodore Nott, sitting opposite him – and sharing his dormitory – was one of them. Rick was going to have to be very careful.

As the meal was finishing, Barty Crouch tapped Rick on the shoulder. "Come with me, Godfry," he said. It was obvious that he didn't intend waiting for Rick to finish his lumpy tapioca pudding. Jumping up, Rick followed his Head of House. Ominously, Crouch led Rick to the same room where Lucius Malfoy had ambushed Harry a few months ago – and a reality away. Rick was apprehensive, and on his guard. Have I been found out already? he worried. He closed his eyes for a moment, as he walked, projecting a magical map of the room. There was just one person in the room, by the name of Evan Rosier.

When they reached the door, Crouch indicated, with a nod of his head, that Rick should enter the room, but did not follow. Rick cast his Reflecting Shield, just in case, as he closed the door behind him. Rosier was a large, balding, middle-aged wizard with a chubby reddish face. He had a grey moustache and goatee beard. He didn't

rise from his armchair as Rick entered, but gestured to Rick to stand in front of him.

As Rick stood uncomfortably before him, he was addressed in an arrogant and condescending tone. "I'm Rosier, from the Eugenics Enforcement Agency. You're Rick Godfry from ... New Zealand," he said, consulting a parchment in his left hand. "Is that correct?"

"Err ... yes," said Rick nervously.

"New Zealand is a bit far out of the way and the wizarding community is too sparse for the provisions of the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program to have reached there ... yet. However, rest assured, we will be extending the program to even the remotest corner of the world, in the very near future," continued Rosier, officiously.

"Now, under the regulations which came into force when the program began in 1984, only we wizards, who are classified as belonging to the Magistocracy, are permitted to breed. All other wizards, such as yourself, must be magically sterilized. It won't hurt, you won't feel a thing." He pointed his wand at Rick, and muttered a spell. "That's all," he said. "It's done, you may go now."

Rick wasn't sure if he was expected to thank Rosier for sterilizing him or not. He just muttered "OK," and left the room. Well, he was right about one thing, thought Rick to himself, it is painless. That pompous Pureblood git didn't seem to feel a thing when the spell rebounded off my shield and sterilized him! His breeding days are over. I hope he won't be too hard on his concubines, and blame them, when they suddenly stop producing children.

Rick had taken the opportunity to probe Rosier's mind. He picked up some interesting information about the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program. Apparently, it had been opposed, at the start, by a small group of highly-knowledgeable witches and wizards, who were familiar with the Muggle science known as Genetics. They had warned that the inevitable result would be serious inbreeding and a lack of genetic diversity. The Magistocracy itself, as well as the offspring of concubines, would be affected. They predicted an

alarming rise in the numbers of Squibs, and a significant reduction in the overall intelligence and magical ability of the Wizarding world. These views were very unpopular with the Eternal Emperor and the Magistocracy. Since none of the witches and wizards raising objections belonged to the Magistocracy, the problem was neatly resolved, to Rosier's mind, by killing the lot of them. Rick also picked up some of the more interesting spells which were Rosier's stock in trade.

Rick quickly learned to keep his head down, and his face expressionless – just like everyone else. With his excellent Legilimency skills, he managed to stay out of trouble and avoid suspicion. He had no difficulty identifying the many spies amongst the teachers – and his fellow students – who reported to Lucius Malfoy's Secret Security Service. Snape had been right about the standard of the classes. Most of them seemed well behind the sixth-year ones in his old reality.

Mostly, the classes were just plain boring. But there was one class that Rick hated and loathed with passion. It was Social Conformity and Obedience. It was taught – most appropriately, it seemed to Rick – by Professor Dolores Umbridge. She was right in her element, trotting out the vile state propaganda. The object of the class was indoctrination. There was no discussion, debate, or evaluation of the racist, elitist ideology they were taught, parrot fashion. All that was expected of them was to memorize the content of their textbooks – and believe it. Rick had no problem with the first part, and Umbridge considered him a model student, because he was able to regurgitate, verbatim, in their frequent tests, the evil doctrines with which they were relentlessly brainwashed.

The Eternal Emperor, they were taught, was a deity, an immortal god of the wizarding world. His early life as Tom Riddle, who had been a student at Hogwarts, was totally obscured. His origin as the orphaned son of a Muggle father was completely concealed. Even the name Lord Voldemort was never mentioned. It seemed that Tom Riddle had re-invented himself – and the truth – yet again.

According to the official mythology, the Eternal Emperor was sent by the spirits of the great wizards of Antiquity, led by Salazar Slytherin. This was supposed to have happened around 1980. He was sent to save the wizarding world from destruction, by the Apostates, who were led by the Deluded One – Albus Dumbledore. The Apostates, they were taught, were working secretly with the Muggles to destroy the wizarding world. No explanation was ever offered as to their motivation for wanting to destroy their own world, and Rick knew better than to ask Umbridge for one.

The evil, deluded Apostates had allowed the blood of the wizarding race to become dangerously diluted and polluted with Muggle blood. They allowed loathsome Squibs, not only to survive, but to breed. There was no respect for, or subservience to, the Noble Families who had scrupulously guarded the purity of their blood. They were accorded no honour or preference whatsoever. In fact, they were treated no better than the vile Muggle-born witches and wizards, who were actively encouraged to join – and pollute – the wizarding world.

They were taught about the Hierarchy, which must be observed and respected at all times. The Eternal Emperor was not part of the Hierarchy. He was far, far above it. At the top of the Hierarchy, was the Magistocracy. The Magistocracy, itself, was divided into castes. There were seven of them. The highest caste was known as the Noblest Families, although it consisted of two families only: the Malfoys and the Parkinsons. Umbridge made them memorize the names of all the Noble Families of the Magistocracy, and to which caste they belonged.

Beneath the Magistocracy came the children of concubines – who were sired by wizards of the Magistocracy. They were ranked into castes according to the proportion and caste of their Magistocracy blood. They were collectively known as the Serving Castes. Finally, came the rest of the Pureblood witches and wizards. However, since the males were sterilized, they would soon die out. Babies were tested for magical ability at birth, and Squibs were immediately killed.

The ultimate step in the Eternal Emperor's Great Scheme for the salvation of the wizarding world was the extermination of the Muggles – every single, last one of them. This was called the Great Salvation

because it would never again be possible for the blood of the wizarding race to be diluted or polluted with Muggle blood – everyone would be Purebloods. Except for the Eternal Emperor, himself! thought Rick, ironically.

Umbridge also extolled the virtues of the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program. Over many generations it would purify wizarding blood. In a century and a half, all wizards and witches would have a minimum of ninety-nine percent Magistocracy blood – which was the only blood deemed sufficiently pure. But more than that, the breeding program would greatly increase the population of the wizarding world. In a single generation it would overcome the current manpower shortage. In a few more generations, it would produce the manpower necessary to finally destroy the Muggles. The wizarding world, led by the Eternal Emperor and the revered Magistocracy, would possess the entire world.

Since blood was everything, they were taught the importance of respecting and showing subservience to those of purer blood. The Magistocracy held a position of great privilege. There were a number of spells, known as the Restricted Curses, which could only be used by the Magistocracy; and then, only by those of a higher caste upon those of a lower caste – or, of course, upon anyone beneath the Magistocracy in the Hierarchy.

The Restricted Curses included the three Unforgivables, from Rick's reality, along with a number of equally nasty curses that were completely new to him. Voldemort must have created them since coming to power in this reality, Rick guessed. Now he understood why everyone, teachers included, treated the Slytherins with such obsequiousness and deference. Although they were not supposed to use the Restricted Curses until they came of age – which was when they left school and married – they were a law unto themselves, and seemed to do pretty much as they pleased.

Rick tried to keep well away from the Slytherins, despite the fact that Snape had told him he would need to cultivate Draco Malfoy or Pansy Parkinson if he wanted to be initiated as a Death Eater. It soon became obvious that it was going to have to be Pansy, because Draco, very quickly, took a distinct dislike to him.

It all began in their Dark Arts and Duelling classes. Draco was the star dueller in the school – mainly due to the special tutoring his father had provided for him since childhood. Draco, of course, believed it was due to the purity of his blood. In this world, magical power was believed to derive from the purity of one's blood. If Rick had thought that the Draco Malfoy in his reality was an arrogant, conceited git, the one in this world was far worse. Everyone, teachers included, treated him like a little god.

Rick knew he had to impress Barty Crouch, their Dark Arts and Duelling Professor, with his ability. After only a few classes, Crouch was impressed – very impressed. So impressed, in fact, that he decided to pair Rick up with Draco whenever they were practicing with partners. Rick wasn't sure whether respecting and showing subservience to those of purer blood, as they were taught by Umbridge, required him to let Malfoy beat him. Rick really didn't like Draco – and he was damned if he was going to take a dive and let him win. Besides, he needed to impress Crouch. Rick was careful to maintain a subservient and respectful demeanour towards Draco, but, nevertheless, he beat him – every time.

Draco became furious. He began cheating; using charms and curses they weren't supposed to be practicing or even know about. Rick could read Draco's mind, which made it easy to block or neutralise whatever means Draco was using to cheat. He was careful however, not to use his Reflecting Shield. He wanted to keep it a secret. Finally, in one class, Draco became so furious at his inability to defeat Rick – by fair means or foul – that he stormed out of the class in a huff. That was the last time Barty Crouch paired Draco with Rick. Obviously, Draco had made it clear to Crouch that he would not have Rick as his practice partner again.

Despite the fact that Rick disliked Crouch, the Dark Arts and Duelling Professor took a shine to him. One Monday afternoon, he asked Rick to stay behind after class. "Take a seat Godfrey," he said. "You're the best dueller I've ever encountered at your age. I was most impressed with the way you bested young Malfoy. What did you say you wanted to do after you finished school?"

“Err, I was thinking about studying some more, sir, and perhaps becoming a teacher,” said Rick, in an uncertain voice.

“Well, you’re bright enough,” replied Crouch. “I understand you’re top in all your classes – not that they’re very difficult these days. When I was a student here, the standard was much higher. But the point is, I’ve already made a mandatory recommendation for you to the Secret Security Service. Mandatory recommendations are rare, but in your case, I feel it’s warranted. It means that not only can you join the Secret Security Service – you must join. A wizard with your power is too valuable an asset not to be used for the benefit of state security. Also, we don’t like having wizards as powerful as you, out there somewhere, where we can’t keep an eye on them. We like to know what they’re up to. When you join the Secret Security Service after you finish school, they’ll be able to keep tabs on you.”

“Err, thank you, sir,” said Rick. “I’d never thought about working in the Secret Security Service, but I think I might like it.”

“Of course you’ll like it,” said Crouch, gruffly. “What we teach here at school is all watered-down kids’ stuff. We don’t teach the really powerful, nasty magic – because we don’t want anyone but the Secret Security Service to know how to use it – you understand? With your ability, you’ll really lap up what they teach you there I’d also like to put in a recommendation for you to become a Death Eater – what do you think of that?” asked Crouch, as if he’d just offered Rick his most cherished dream.

“I didn’t know it was possible,” said Rick. “Err, what does it involve?”

“Well, it’s not like a job. Some are even fortunate enough to join while they are still at school. Most Death Eaters are members of the Secret Security Service, but not all. I’m a Death Eater,” he said, proudly pushing up the sleeve of his left arm to reveal the Dark Mark burned into the skin, just below the elbow. “Becoming a Death Eater is joining a very elite and exclusive club. It’s the only prestigious position that the likes of you and me, who aren’t in the Magistocracy, can ever hope to achieve. You see, the Death Eaters are the Eternal Emperor’s personal guard. To serve our Eternal Emperor – the saviour of the wizarding world – is the greatest privilege. We don’t

take our orders from the Ministry of Magic or even the Secret Security Service. We are answerable only to the Eternal Emperor himself.”

“I’m going to owl through my recommendation today. I’m one of a small number of Death Eaters who are qualified to make recommendations. Once your name is lodged, you wait to receive your invitation. Only a handful of nominees get inducted each year, so it’s just a matter of waiting for your name to come up. It can take anything from a few months to a few years. If you know the right people, of course, you can speed things up. You’re at a bit of a disadvantage there, Godfrey.”

“Thank you for your recommendation, sir, I really appreciate it,” said Rick. He found it easy to appear grateful because, in fact, he was. He desperately wanted to be initiated as a Death Eater – although not for any of the reasons that Crouch might have imagined.

“Yes, I imagine you are,” replied Crouch, with an evil grin. “It’s a lot of fun being a Death Eater. Wizards like you and me who aren’t in the Magistocracy get the opportunity to use the Restricted Curses. I bet Professor Umbridge didn’t teach you that. She wouldn’t know – never having been a Death Eater – or a member of the Secret Security Service. Yeah, we’re having a bit of a rumble this weekend. We’re going to kill ourselves a whole bunch of Muggles ... I can’t really tell you anything about it – it’s all hush, hush. Of course, we’re going to make it look like an accident.”

“Until the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program really starts to kick in, and we have the numbers to take on the Muggles, we don’t want them to know anything about us. In fact, that’s what the operation this weekend is about. It’s a bunch of hippies and whatnots, playing at being witches and wizards. Although, who knows, some of them might have some magical power. Occasionally, you get a Muggle without a drop of magical blood in them, that can do magic. When I was a student here, they were allowed to come to Hogwarts – the disgusting Mudbloods. You don’t know how lucky you are, being spared all of that – having to associate with that kind of filth!”

Rick just nodded in agreement. He had been probing Crouch’s mind to find out more about the Death Eater operation. There was some

group called the Stonehenge Wiccans who were having a meeting on the coming Sunday afternoon. The Death Eaters were going to wait until the meeting had begun, and then Apparate to the meeting hall. They were planning to torture the Muggles, for fun, using the Cruciatus Curse and other Restricted Curses. Then they would blow up the hall, killing everyone inside. The Muggle authorities would think it was the work of the IRA or some other terrorist group.

As he made his way back to Ravenclaw Tower, Rick wondered whether he should try to intervene, to stop the terrible attack that was planned upon the innocent Muggles. On the one hand, it seemed like the right thing to do. But on the other, there was so much evil in this wicked world that he feared he would become side-tracked putting on band-aids here and there. No, he had to focus on his key task, which was to bring this whole hideous reality to an end. Getting side-tracked only risked exposing himself and jeopardising his key mission. There was no point in trying to re-arrange the deck-chairs on this Titanic – the only thing to do was to sink it – and fast!

As he walked along, Rick projected his magical map. It had become a habit in this reality. There were spies everywhere. He was also worried that Draco Malfoy might be planning to ambush and attack him – to pay him back for constantly besting him in their Dark Arts and Duelling classes. As he passed a disused classroom, he saw the name Ginny Weasley, all alone inside, on his magical map. That's strange, thought Rick, I wonder if she's OK. He easily overcame the locking charm on the door and entered.

Ginny was sitting huddled in a corner of the classroom, crying her eyes out. She was so absorbed in her misery that she didn't even notice Rick, until he sat down beside her. He put his own locking charm on the door and cast an Imperturbable Charm on the room. He put his arm around Ginny's shoulder and gave her a gentle hug, sending comforting feelings towards her. She was so distraught that she didn't even ask him how he'd found her or managed to get into the classroom.

"Ginny, what's wrong?" asked Rick gently. "Why are you crying?" Without saying a word, she thrust a tear-soaked parchment towards him. Rick opened it and began reading silently:

Weasley,

You are required in my chambers on Saturday night.

Be waiting at the entrance to the Apartments of the Noblest at 8pm.

It will be my pleasure to prepare you for your future vocation as a concubine of the Magistocracy.

Draco Malfoy

Rick didn't know what to say to Ginny, the intent of the message was all too obvious. "What happens if you don't go?" asked Rick.

"He'll send a couple of his thugs to find me," she cried. "They'll stun me and drag me off to Malfoy. Then he'll put me under the Imperius Curse and do exactly as he wants with me. It happens all too often to the older, more attractive Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw witches," she sobbed. "The wizards of the Magistocracy can do exactly as they like with us. No one dares to challenge them, no matter what evil they do. And Draco Malfoy is the worst of them, by far." Ginny broke down, sobbing uncontrollably.

Despite his best intentions not to get involved in the affairs of this world, Rick couldn't help himself. "Don't worry, Ginny," he said, "I'll sort out Draco bloody Malfoy – he won't be bothering you – I'll see to it!"

"No!" gasped Ginny, "Don't be crazy! You don't understand how it is here! You'll just get yourself killed. Please Rick, just leave it. It's my fate. There's nothing that you, or anyone, can do to save me from it. I just hoped to have a bit more time, a few more years, before I had to face the inevitable," she said, bursting into tears again.

"Ginny, it will be OK, I promise you. You'll be getting another message from Malfoy soon, telling you not to bother coming. I can't tell you how I'm going to do it, but I know a way. I won't be putting myself in any danger at all. Just promise me that you won't mention this conversation, OK?"

“Don’t worry,” said Ginny with a sad sigh. “I know better than to talk to anyone about anything in this place. But please be careful, Rick, don’t take any chances ... please.”

After leaving the classroom, Rick ducked into an alcove and made himself invisible before Apparating to the Apartments of the Noblest. It was, in fact, the old Gryffindor common room, which had been divided down the middle into two luxurious apartments for the heirs of the wizarding world’s Noblest Families. Rick was standing in Draco Malfoy’s apartment. It oozed opulence and luxury. But Rick wasn’t interested in finding out how the Magistocracy lived. Draco was sprawled comfortably in an enormous throne-like chair. He was idly thumbing through a book and sipping occasionally from a golden goblet.

When Rick probed Evan Rosier’s mind, on the night that Rosier had attempted to sterilize him, Rick had discovered some very interesting – and very secret – spells. Spells which were known only to a handful of wizards in the Eugenics Enforcement Agency. One was the sterilization spell with which Rosier had inadvertently sterilized himself. The sterilization spell did not stop a wizard from being attracted to witches, but it made him infertile, so he could not produce children.

There was another spell which Rick discovered in Evan Rosier’s mind, called the Impotence Spell. It worked quite differently. Any wizard, upon whom it was cast, would not only lose all interest in witches, but he would also lose the ability to mate – permanently. This was the spell which Rick cast on Draco. Ginny Weasley and all the other Hogwarts witches were now safe from Draco Malfoy.

Rick had considered using the Squibbus Curse on Draco. But the consequence of that would have been evident to all, and would have caused a furore. Rick might have been interrogated by the Secret Security Service, simply because he was new at Hogwarts. They might have investigated his purported origins in New Zealand. No, the Impotence Spell would solve the immediate threat to Ginny, without

precipitating an investigation. Rick was certain that Draco would keep very quiet about his impotence problem. It was his destiny, and his duty under the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program, to sire thousands of children. An impotent wizard in the Magistocracy was like a fire-fighter without a hose – utterly useless!

No, Draco will keep very quiet about his problem, thought Rick. He still has a year and a half before he begins breeding. At first, he'll hope it's just something temporary. Then he'll start secretly researching potency spells and potions – hoping to find a cure before crunch time comes. He'll be too scared to tell his father, or anyone else. The shame would be unbearable.

Rick had briefly entertained the idea of casting the Impotence Spell on all the Slytherin wizards. Draco wasn't the only one abusing the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw witches – although he was the worst. But, much as he wanted to, Rick knew it would be too risky. One or other of the wizards might mention something casually, or notice that his friends had also lost interest in witches. If they started talking among themselves, they would soon realise they all had the same problem, and guess that someone had done something to them. It would very quickly be out in the open and cause an enormous scandal. There would be a massive investigation. Rick couldn't risk it, so he had to content himself with saving Ginny from Draco. There was just too much evil in this world. He had to get to the root of it – and destroy the whole evil reality.

On Thursday evening, as Rick was sitting in the Ravenclaw common room, Ginny sat down opposite him at the table. When he looked up she quickly smiled at him and mouthed the word Thanks. Rick checked that they weren't being observed and gave Ginny a quick smile. Obviously Draco had informed her that she was no longer required to visit him this Saturday evening after all.

But it wasn't Saturday evening that had been occupying Rick's thoughts of late, it was Sunday afternoon. Rick had been having an ongoing argument with himself, since Monday, when Crouch had told him about the intended attack on the Stonehenge Wiccans. Rick

knew that his one-and-only goal had to be getting initiated as a Death Eater, so he could get his wand back from Voldemort, and end this whole evil reality. But somehow, when he thought about innocent people suffering, he couldn't help himself. But is that really the only reason I want to go to that meeting? he asked himself. Is it just to save those innocent people, or is there something more to it? Like the possibility that there might be some Muggle-born witches and wizards there – or more to the point, a certain Muggle-born witch – by the name of Hermione Granger?

Rick's thoughts were interrupted by a large silvery owl, which landed on the desk in front of him. It gave him a haughty look and extended a leg arrogantly towards him. As Rick took the parchment, he noticed a look of alarm on Ginny's face. She obviously knew whose owl it was. Rick had no idea, but it seemed likely that others in the common room would know as well – and be secretly watching for his reaction when he read the parchment. Knowing he wasn't very good at hiding his emotions, Rick decided to take it up to his dormitory and read it there.

He drew the hangings around his four-poster bed, before removing the silver-grey ribbon from the parchment and opening it. A small brooch fell out, landing on his bed. Rick inspected it carefully, without touching it. The motif on the brooch was two intertwined serpents – one silver, the other green. Very Slytherin, he thought to himself. He read the message:

To Mr. Rick Godfry

Your attendance is requested in my apartment, this evening at nine o'clock.

For reasons, which I will explain, no one must know of your visit – or of this invitation.

The enclosed brooch is a Portkey which will be activated at exactly nine o'clock.

Pansy Parkinson.

When he had finished reading it, the parchment burst into flames. Rick smiled to himself. He had been surreptitiously giving Pansy the Charm Treatment for the past couple of weeks, ever since it became evident that there was no chance of cultivating Draco. He had no idea how to cultivate Pansy. In this hierarchical, caste-ridden society, the Magistocracy treated wizards like him with utter disdain, as something far beneath them. He knew there was no way a wizard in his position could ever approach a witch of the Magistocracy – particularly, Pansy. All he could do was keep up the Charm, and hope she would make the first move. It looked like it might just have worked.

At exactly nine o'clock, Rick picked up the brooch and felt himself being whisked away from his dormitory. A moment later, he arrived, unsteadily, in Pansy's apartment. It was the other half of the Gryffindor common room from the one he had invisibly visited a few days earlier, to cast the Impotence Spell on Draco.

Pansy was reclining elegantly on a chaise lounge. She was dressed exquisitely in pale pink robes and wore enough diamonds and gold to stock a small jeweller's shop. "Would you care for a sherry?" she asked, waving her hand casually towards a table, where Rick found a crystal sherry decanter and two crystal glasses on a polished silver tray. He poured them each a sherry, handing a glass to Pansy before sitting down on a nearby chair. He was well aware that he was expected to wait subserviently for Pansy to invite him to sit – but he wasn't going to play her games. With his Legilimency skills, he was well aware of Pansy's feelings towards him. He waited patiently for her to speak.

She took a slow, languid sip from her sherry, before setting it down on a small table to her right. "You may be wondering," she began, "why I wanted to talk with you. Well, I'm not going to beat about the bush. I imagine, by now, you have a good understanding of our wizarding society and how things work. I imagine it all seems a little strange to you, coming from overseas."

"It certainly does," said Rick, with a faint smile, continuing to use his charm.

“Well, I don’t know what you think about our Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program – but I think it stinks!” she said angrily.

Rick was completely taken aback. It was the last thing he would have expected Pansy to say.

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Pansy, reassuringly. “There are no hidden spies or listening spells in my apartment – Daddy makes sure of that. If there were, I wouldn’t have invited you here,” she said with a sly grin.

“That blasted breeding program – it’s so outrageously unfair!” she continued passionately. “We witches in the Magistocracy absolutely loathe it. It’s not hard to tell that the whole contemptible thing was cooked up by the wizards, without us witches even knowing what it was all about – until it was too late, and it had already been enacted.”

“It’s completely unjust to the witches of the Magistocracy,” complained Pansy, bitterly. “I suppose you know that I’m betrothed to Draco Malfoy. In a year and a half, when we finish school, I shall have to marry him – because my father and his father decided it – they didn’t ask me if I wanted to marry that self-centred, pretentious little poseur!”

“Then I’m expected to become a bloody baby-factory for him. Damned Draco expects me to bear him at least eight children! Can you imagine what that will do to my beautiful figure?” she asked woefully. “Not that Draco will care, he’ll have his blasted concubines – he’s planning on keeping a hundred and twenty of them! When I’m old and worn out at fifty, he’ll be picking out pretty, young sixteen year-old witches to replace his old concubines. Hell! He’ll still be doing it when I’m a hundred. Is that fair – to me? I ask you?” she demanded, in outrage.

Rick really felt like saying that it was a lot more unfair to the concubines than it was to Pansy, but she didn’t seem interested in anyone else’s misfortunes – even though they were far greater than her own. Rick just nodded sympathetically – although it was for Ginny and all the other witches in her situation that he felt sympathy – not Pansy and the pampered witches of the Magistocracy.

"I guess there's not much you can do about it," said Rick, trying to sound sympathetic. "It's the law, after all."

"No, there's nothing I can do about that blasted law, it's true," said Pansy, angrily. "Even the Magistocracy have to abide by all these stupid laws – or at least make sure they're not caught breaking them," she said with a smirk. "No, I'll have to marry Draco – and have his beastly babies – I'm resigned to that. But while he's off playing with his concubines, I intend having some fun of my own. What's good for the goose is good for the gander – or, more to the point – what's good for the gander is good for the goose," said Pansy with smug grin on her face.

"Err ... what do you mean?" asked Rick.

"What I mean," said Pansy, defiantly, "is that if bloody Draco can have his concubines, then I can have my gigolos." She was looking at Rick with a very self-satisfied grin on her face.

"Err ... is it ... err, permitted?" asked Rick, nervously.

"Of course not," laughed Pansy. "But that hasn't stopped a good many witches of the Magistocracy from taking lovers. Narcissa Malfoy is rumoured to have a steady stream of young, handsome beaux – and who could blame her, when you look at that slimy creepy husband of hers."

"Doesn't Lucius Malfoy know that she's ... err —"

"Making a prize cuckold of him?" asked Pansy, laughing wickedly. "As long as it doesn't get out, he probably couldn't care less. Do you think he cares about his old wife – when he has so many young, beautiful concubines at his beck and call – come off it! Obviously the witches of the Magistocracy know exactly what's going on – what do you think they talk about all day long – each other's dalliances, of course. As long as it's kept quiet and doesn't get any further, there's no problem at all. Appearances are what count here – not realities."

"But where are the beaux from? The Magistocracy?" asked Rick, confused.

"Of course not," said Pansy, snorting derisively. "The wizards of the Magistocracy are all a bunch of prize peacocks. Anyway, they have their hands full with their concubines. And they're not sterilized, so it wouldn't be safe. Breeding and bloodlines are taken extremely seriously here. Newborn babies are very scrupulously checked. Their paternity is easily established by magical means. It wouldn't do at all, for a Magistocracy witch to bear the child of the wrong wizard."

"Then all of these beaux, who aren't Magistocracy, must also know what's going on," said Rick.

"Well, of course they do," laughed Pansy. "But they'd be the last ones to talk about it. I mean if an indiscretion were to get out, it would be far worse for the wizard than the witch."

"Err ... how bad?" asked Rick, nervously. "Would he be ... killed?"

"I don't know," said Pansy, shrugging her shoulders carelessly. Obviously, it was of no concern to her. "I suppose it might depend upon how well connected he was. Anyway," she said, looking Rick directly in the eye, "no one is going to discover us."

"Us?" exclaimed Rick, gulping.

"Yes, us," she said, smiling seductively at Rick. "Why do you think I invited you to visit me? I hadn't planned on beginning my career as a seductress of handsome young wizards until after I was married. For one thing – there aren't any here at Hogwarts that appeal to me – or at least there weren't – until you turned up."

"From what I've been hearing lately, Draco's been having his way with some of the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw witches. I'm damned if I'm going to let that little git get one up on me. So, I've decided to begin my career in the boudoir a little sooner than planned – and I can't think of a nicer way to start – than with you," she added, with another seductive smirk.

Rick's mind was whirring away – desperately searching for a way to avoid Pansy's amorous plans. He couldn't tell her that she had nothing to worry about. That Draco wouldn't be getting one up on her – or anyone. That Draco would not be having his way with any Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw witches – or any other witches, for that matter – ever again.

Eventually, Rick hit upon a way to use the situation to promote his own plans. He smiled at Pansy, using a liberal amount of charm. "It's a great privilege, Pansy, to be chosen by you. You're a devastatingly beautiful witch. But ... well, the idea of us ... err ... you know, err ... kind of scares me. I mean it's not that I don't want to ... I do ... but, I'm new here, and I don't know anyone. I don't have any connections. If we were found out, it would be the end of me – for sure. Draco already hates me."

"He certainly does," laughed Pansy. "You have no idea how unbearable he was when you kept beating him in Dark Arts and Duelling. Although now he just pretends it never happened and that he's the greatest dueller at Hogwarts. I just go along with his little self-delusions – I find it best to just humour him. But he's been in an unbearably foul mood the last few days – I have no idea what's the matter with him."

But Rick did.

"Don't worry so much," said Pansy, getting back to the main topic on her agenda. "No one will find out about us – and if they do, Daddy's got loads of influence. He's the Minister of Magic, you know – he'll be able to pull some strings."

"Err ... Pansy," said Rick, sounding worried. "If we get discovered, I probably have more to fear from your father than from Draco or anyone else. The only strings your father is likely to pull are ones that are tied firmly around my neck!"

"Oh, dear! How silly of me, I hadn't thought of that," giggled Pansy. It was obvious to Rick that she wasn't considering his safety at all. It

didn't really concern her – after all, he was just an expendable commodity.

"I have an idea," said Rick. "Professor Crouch has put in a recommendation for me to become a Death Eater."

"Wonderful!" cried Pansy. "If you were a Death Eater, you'd have plenty of protection. Even if we were discovered, no one would be able to touch you, neither my father nor Draco – the Eternal Emperor protects his own."

"Yeah, that's right," said Rick. "That's what I was thinking. Once I'm a Death Eater, I'll be safe, then we can ... you know.... But I want to wait till then. It will be too risky for me ... until I'm initiated. Unfortunately, Professor Crouch thinks it could take a long time for my name to come up, years perhaps, because I don't have any connections – you know – people in high places – who could speed things up for me."

"Oh, but you do now," said Pansy smugly. "You've got me ... and I can get Daddy dear to do whatever I want. Draco and I are both being initiated as Death Eaters in a couple of weeks. We're not really going to be proper Death Eaters, mind you. We won't have to do all the study and training they do; it's really just an honorary initiation. Once we're married, we'll be the royal family of the wizarding world, you know ... so naturally, we need to be Death Eaters," she said, haughtily.

"Our initiation is going to be a huge event. Everyone who's anyone in the wizarding world will be there. I'm sure if I asked Daddy to speed up your invitation so you can be initiated at the same time, he'll be more than happy to oblige his darling daughter," said Pansy, smiling with self-satisfaction.

"That would be wonderful, Pansy," said Rick, turning on the charm, to further encourage her. "After I'm initiated, I'll be able to come and visit you in your boudoir whenever you like," he said, smiling charmingly.

"I'll send Daddy an owl right away," said Pansy. "I can hardly wait."

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 25 - The Stonehenge Wiccans

Sunday afternoon found Rick taking a walk in the Forbidden Forest ... or at least that was his alibi, in case anyone asked where he had been. Despite all his best intentions not to get involved in the affairs of this world, but rather, stay focussed on bringing it to an end, he was going to the meeting which the Death Eaters were planning to turn into a torture session – and a bloodbath.

Rick had considered Apparating to the Headmaster's office and seeking his advice on what he should do. But Professor Snape had kept his distance from Rick since that first eventful day when he had Apparated to the Headmaster's office – only to discover that Snape, and not Dumbledore, was Hogwarts' Headmaster. Snape knew a good deal more than Rick about this world, and obviously thought it safer for them to ignore each other – there were spies everywhere – even in the Headmaster's office. So Rick was left to make the decision by himself.

As soon as he was well into the forest, he used his Metamorphmagus skills to disguise himself as Neville Longbottom, who had been killed as a baby in this world, and wouldn't be recognised. Then he Apparated invisibly to the London street where the meeting hall was located.

Rick found a toilet, where he made himself visible, before entering the small hall. He found a seat towards the back, from where he was fairly inconspicuous, and could observe what was happening. The meeting had not yet begun. There were eighty to ninety people, mostly standing about in groups, laughing and chatting. Many of them wore strange clothes, and looked like they were out of some medieval painting. A few even wore robes and pointy hats. Most of them were in their thirties, forties, and fifties. Rick noticed a few younger ones closer to his own age and even some small children, who were running excitedly up and down the aisles. He spent several minutes carefully scrutinising everyone in the hall, but he didn't recognise a soul. He'd had a hunch – well, a desperate hope, really, if he was being honest with himself – that Hermione would be here. She wasn't, and he was bitterly disappointed.

People began sitting down, as the meeting was about to begin. Out of the corner of his eye, Rick saw someone enter and sit down towards the back, on the other side of the hall. It was someone who looked very familiar—someone who looked like ... Hermione! thought Rick. His heart began beating furiously. It was less than a month since he had seen her, but he missed her terribly. He had to remind himself that although it was Hermione, she didn't know him – she probably didn't even know she was a witch. She wasn't dressed up in weird clothes like most of the others. She didn't appear to know any of them; she sat by herself, looking about curiously at all the strange people.

“Righty-ho then!” said a tall man dressed up in medieval garb, jumping athletically up onto the stage. “It's 'bout time we got started! I'm Robbie, for those of you who don't know me, and I'm Chief Wicca of the Stonehenge Wiccans. Now, what we're here for today, is to finalise the plans for our annual Spring Equinox Festival, which will be happening at Stonehenge in a couple of weeks. We want to make it bigger and better than ever this year. The key strategy, which we're going to sort out this afternoon, is how to get the TV cameras there. We want to get the festival covered on prime time news, so we can get our message across to as many people as possible – that Magic really does exist. Now, what I propose —”

But they never found out what he was going to propose, because at that moment, eight, black-robed, masked Death Eaters appeared on the stage – from nowhere. There was a collective gasp from the audience, who had no idea what was happening. The Death Eaters flicked their wands at the four exits, slamming the doors shut, and locking them. One of them flicked his wand at Robbie, sending him flying from the stage onto the people sitting in the front row.

“Sonus,” said one of the Death Eaters, stepping forward. It was Barty Crouch – Rick recognised his cruel, cold voice. “There's been a change of plan.... You're not going to be getting any messages across. There certainly is Magic, but none of you lot have a clue about it. Real Magic comes from magical blood – and those of us who have it, intend to keep it secret. Since you're all so interested in magic, we're going to give you a taste of real magic – before we kill the lot of you,” he sneered.

A gasp of horror rose from the audience. Those near the aisles made a desperate dash for the exits, only to find them firmly locked. The eight Death Eaters now pointed their wands threateningly at the audience. “Cruc —” they began. But before they could finish, a loud voice boomed out “Squibbus.”

The surprised Death Eaters looked about frantically for the source of the booming voice – and the sudden chill that permeated the hall. The audience, already utterly confused and terrified, had no idea what was happening.

“Unfortunately for you Death Eaters, there has been yet another change of plan,” said the ethereal voice, which seemed to fill the hall, and yet come from nowhere in particular. “I suggest you stop pointing your wands around and attempting to curse these good people. You’re wasting your time, you know – I’ve just Squibbed the lot of you. Yes, Squibbed – as in, turned you ex-Death Eaters into Squibs. I’m sure you know what Squibs are – and what happens to them. You had better leave now, and hide – not from these good folk, but from your fellow Death Eaters and the Secret Security Service – Goodbye, Squibs!”

One of the doors suddenly opened and the dazed Death Eaters were unceremoniously bundled out of the hall. The door slammed shut behind them. The astonished people looked around fearfully. What on earth was going on?

“Please, relax, everyone,” said the disembodied voice in a warm, friendly tone. “You are all perfectly safe now. I locked the doors again because I have a most important message for you. One which I wish you all to hear before you leave.”

“Who ... or what, are you?” asked Robbie, nervously. He was standing in front of the stage, looking about wildly, not knowing in which direction to address his question.

“I am the spirit of a great wizard of yore. I have come here today to prevent those evil wizards from torturing and killing you. What they said, however, was partly correct. There is Magic, as you folk

apparently believe. In fact, there is a whole magical world of witches and wizards who keep themselves hidden from other people. But, it is unfortunately, ruled at this time by a very wicked wizard, who hates all non-magical folk.

“This evil wizard does not want ordinary people to know about Magic. He wants to keep the magical world secret. Your group has come to his attention, because you want everyone to know about Magic. Not only is he terribly evil, he is also enormously powerful. I cannot protect you from him again. I can only advise you, in the strongest terms, to disband your group forthwith and forget all about Magic. If you do not, you will surely be killed. Please take my sincere warning to heart! Adieu.”

The doors suddenly sprang open, and the strange chill was gone. Everyone was talking at once about the extraordinary visitation. Some of the people got up hurriedly and quickly left. Others stayed, talking and arguing excitedly. Rick noticed Hermione leaving and followed her out of the hall. He knew he should just let her go and get back to school ... but he couldn't – he had to talk to her.

Rick followed her quietly in the weak sunshine of the chilly, London afternoon. “Err, excuse me,” he said, approaching her a couple of blocks away from the hall. She turned and looked at him suspiciously for a moment, before turning back, and quickening her pace. Damn it, he thought, she thinks I'm trying to pick her up. “I ... I just wanted to ask you what you thought about what happened back there at that meeting,” said Rick, drawing alongside her, and using his charm.

“I don't talk to strangers, especially ones that belong to crackpot groups like that one. Now please go away, and leave me alone!” she said forcefully.

“Please wait,” said Rick, using all his charm to stop her running away.

Hermione stopped and stared at him. “Why are you following me?” she demanded. “Are you some kind of stalker?”

“No,” said Rick, “I'm not a stalker, honest; and I'm not a member of the Stonehenge Wiccans either. I just wanted to ask you what you

thought about that meeting.” All the time he was pouring on the charm, and it was obviously starting to have an effect.

“Well, if you really must know, I thought the meeting was a load of nonsense,” said Hermione, disparagingly. “I’ve never been to one of those meetings before; I only went ... out of curiosity, to find out what it was all about. I thought all the theatrics, with those men in black and the ghost, were quite absurd – I mean it was pretty obviously all part of some choreographed performance, intended to convince the gullible that there is magic and ghosts and all the other ridiculous nonsense those wacky people believe in.”

“So, you don’t believe in magic?” asked Rick.

“Of course not,” said Hermione, although she sounded a little less certain of herself.

“What if I could prove to you that magic exists?” asked Rick, keeping up the charm.

“But you can’t,” protested Hermione, “because it doesn’t!”

“You don’t sound so sure of yourself,” said Rick, probing her mind. She was, in fact, extremely confused about magic. As he suspected, Hermione had occasionally performed Accidental Magic when she was angry or experiencing other intense emotions. Magic was the only conceivable explanation, for what she had herself witnessed, firsthand – but she simply refused to accept it. It was diametrically opposed to her scientific world-view. Nevertheless, there was doubt in her mind. It was that doubt, which had drawn her to the meeting this afternoon.

“Could we just cross the road and sit down for a few minutes in that park over there?” asked Rick, indicating the large public park on the other side of the road. “If you just give me a few minutes, I can prove to you, empirically, beyond doubt, that magic does exist,” said Rick, ramping up the charm.

“This is most unusual,” said Hermione, hesitantly. “I don’t make a habit of going to parks with strange boys....” Her desire to know if

Rick could in deed prove the existence of magic overcame her scepticism. Rick probed her mind and could tell he had sparked her insatiable appetite for knowledge. "I suppose a public park should be safe enough," she said finally. For all her rational objections to magic, she had experienced too many strange things in her life. Her scientific mind demanded an explanation, which she was unable to find in her extensive research on the subject. She doubted Rick would be able to offer her empirical evidence of the existence of magic, but she was so curious, that she couldn't pass up the opportunity. And, unaccountably, she found herself strongly attracted to this stranger.

They sat down on a secluded bench, at some distance from the many adults and children enjoying the park on a sunny winter's Sunday afternoon. "OK," said Hermione, "you have one minute starting now, or I leave."

Rick cast a Muggle Repelling Charm, as well as an Imperturbable Charm, around them, so they would neither be noticed, nor overheard. "You're not giving me time to explain things first, or to take things slowly. I'm sorry, but you may find this a little scary – please don't panic. Look at me," said Rick. Hermione was utterly stunned as Rick transformed from Neville Longbottom into Rick Godfrey. "Please don't scream – it's just magic," he said, smiling at her. Hermione did scream, but due to the Imperturbable Charm, no one heard her but Rick. She leapt to her feet to run away, but Rick raised a hand and she was gently, but firmly, forced back down onto bench.

"Calm down," said Rick. "Take a few deep breaths. You are perfectly safe, you are in no danger."

But it wasn't her physical safety that Hermione was afraid for – it was her sanity. She sat with one hand over her mouth, her mind desperately attempting to re-group into some semblance of a coherent world-view.

After several minutes of stunned silence, she asked in a shaky voice, "Who or what are you?"

“I’m Rick Godfry, and this is what I really look like. I disguised myself for that meeting. Oh ... and I’m a wizard. And you, Hermione, are a witch.”

“Me? A witch? What do you mean? And how do you know my name?” asked Hermione, feeling very confused.

“Yes, Hermione, you are a witch – and a very powerful one,” said Rick, ignoring her interruption with a voice of calm certainty. “I’m sure strange things have sometimes happened, when you’ve been very angry, or upset, or, perhaps, very happy. It’s called Accidental Magic. What I said in that hall about the magical world being ruled by a wicked wizard, is perfectly true. You should —”

“What you said?” exclaimed Hermione. “What are you talking about?”

“What you saw in that hall was no charade, it was all deadly serious,” said Rick, looking at Hermione, gravely. “Those people who suddenly appeared on the stage, the ones dressed all in black, are called Death Eaters. They were about to torture the people in the hall, and then blow it up, killing everyone inside, including you. The one who spoke, was one of my teachers from school – a school of magic. I found out what they were planning to do, and decided to try to save the people at the meeting. There was no ghost of course. I used magic to pretend to be a ghost, and I cast a spell on the Death Eaters which destroyed their magic – to stop them torturing and murdering everyone.”

“But that’s just too far-fetched,” said Hermione, incredulously, “I ... I can’t believe it. Do some more magic. I want to believe you, but it’s all so ... unbelievable!” Rick looked around, to make sure his Muggle Repelling Charm was working, and that no one was watching, then he made himself invisible.

“Do you believe me now, Hermione?” he said in his ghostly voice. Hermione put out her hand, then gasped and instinctively pulled it away as she touched Rick.

“Yes, OK, I suppose I have to ... please come back.” But when Rick re-appeared, he was a grey tabby cat, sitting purring on the bench.

As Hermione reached out a tentative hand to pat it, the cat turned back into Rick. “Oh!” said Hermione, pulling her hand away. “Goodness – yes, I do believe you. I mean, unless I’m hallucinating ... it must be true. Magic is the only explanation.” Hermione felt giddy, as if someone had just turned her whole world upside down. Her mind was in turmoil. “So why can’t I do magic, like you – if I’m a witch, like you say. Why can’t I turn into a cat?” she asked hesitantly.

“Because to do magic, you need the innate ability – which you have – plus, you need to learn how to use it. When children with magical ability turn eleven, they start going to a special school for magic. But when Voldemort – that’s the name of the evil ruler of the magical world – came to power, just after you were born, he brought in many terrible, racist laws. One of them was that only the children of so-called Pureblood magical families could go to the magical school and learn magic.”

“That’s terrible – it’s so unfair,” said Hermione, angrily. “I feel like I’ve been cheated of my birthright! Can you tell me all about the magical world,” she asked, clearly fascinated by this whole new reality, which Rick had suddenly opened her eyes to.

Rick told Hermione about the magical world in this reality; about the Magistocracy and the Wizarding Breeding and Purification Program and about Voldemort’s plan to exterminate the Muggles.

Hermione was shocked. When he had finished, she shivered, and said, “I’m glad, after all, that I’m not a part of that whole wicked world. Why is the wizarding world so evil? You seem ... very nice....”

“Well, actually,” sighed Rick, “it’s my fault ... in a way.”

“Why?” asked Hermione. Rick didn’t seem at all evil to her ... she found herself liking him – a lot.

“It’s a long story,” said Rick, looking sadly down at his feet and sighing, not knowing where to start or how to explain it to someone who had only just come to terms with the existence of magic. “You see, fifteen years ago, Voldemort was supposed to have lost all his

powers and to have almost died. The world was supposed to have been completely different – a much better world than this one.”

“But, how can you know something like that?” asked Hermione, confused. “How can you say that something was supposed to have happened? – that the world was supposed to be different – that makes no sense at all.”

“I know how the world was supposed to be, Hermione,” said Rick, sighing sadly. “You see, I lived in that world – until just a few weeks ago.”

“What on earth do you mean? You’re not making any sense at all!” said Hermione, completely mystified.

“A few weeks ago,” began Rick. “No, wait ... that’s not best the place to start. OK, fifteen years ago, this evil wizard, Voldemort, tried to murder a one-year-old baby, named Harry Potter. He’d just murdered the baby’s parents. Now ... at the point where he tries to murder the baby, there are two possible things that could happen. One is that he succeeds in killing him, and then he goes on to become the tyrannical ruler of the wizarding world – with all the horrible consequences I’ve just told you about – that’s this reality.

“But, there’s another possibility, which is that he fails, when he tries to kill Harry Potter. His curse rebounds on him, destroying his body and almost killing him. He disappears from the wizarding world for many years, until he finally gets his body back, and though he’s trying to take over the wizarding world, he hasn’t succeeded – yet. That wizarding world – that reality – is a much better place than this one.”

“You talk about this other reality as if it was real – as if it actually happened,” said Hermione, still perplexed.

“It was real – until a few weeks ago,” said Rick, dejectedly. “In that world, Muggle-born witches and wizards – those born to non-wizarding families – like you, went to Hogwarts – the magic school. When you were eleven, you received a letter telling you that you were a witch, and inviting you to come to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to learn how to use your magical abilities. You were in

the same year as Harry Potter, the boy that Voldemort failed to kill, as a baby. The two of you were best friends.”

“But how? ... why? ...” asked Hermione, getting more and more confused, unable to grasp this strange other world. “But ... then what happened to this other world? How did it change into this one? Why did it change?”

“It all goes back to that night,” said Rick, “when Voldemort tried to kill Harry Potter. In the world I lived in, he failed, like I said. No one really knew why he failed. People believed that Harry’s mother put some magical protection on him, and that when she sacrificed her own life, to save him, it became strong enough to protect him from Voldemort’s Killing Curse. The headmaster of my school sent me back in time to watch what happened when —”

“Sent you back in time?” interrupted Hermione, astonished. “You mean witches and wizards can move about in time?”

“Yes, some can, a few – but it’s dangerous. You travelled back through time – in this other reality. But, I don’t have time to go into that now. I’m, err ... I’m an extremely powerful wizard. I had the wand of an ancient wizard and with it, I could move about in time, at will.”

“That’s just amazing,” said Hermione, shaking her head from side to side, utterly fascinated with the concept of Time Travel.

“Anyway,” said Rick, “You and the headmaster had this idea —”

“Me?” asked Hermione, intrigued.

“Yes, you,” said Rick smiling at her. “You had a lot of brilliant ideas – you were the smartest witch in the whole school! We had a problem, you see. We had to find a way of killing Voldemort before he managed to take over the magical world, and turn it into ... well, into one like this awful reality. The problem was that he had a magical cloak that repelled all magical spells and curses, and made him invulnerable. But you and the headmaster figured that the curse which had rebounded on him, and destroyed his body, when he tried to kill baby Harry, probably damaged his protective cloak. So the

headmaster sent me back to that night, to observe exactly where on his body, the rebounding curse struck him.”

“You mean the spot was some kind of Achilles Heel?” asked Hermione.

“Exactly,” replied Rick. “The headmaster repeated many times, most emphatically, that I must not change anything at all. You see, changing the past is the cardinal sin of Time Travel. Even if you try to change something for the better, it will almost certainly have the opposite effect.”

“And you changed something.” guessed Hermione. “You changed something, which resulted in this Voldemort killing Harry Potter, and the good reality you had lived in changing into this nightmare reality. Is that what happened?” asked Hermione, anxiously.

“No,” said Rick, shaking his head sadly. “I didn’t change a thing ... that’s the whole damn problem! I listened to Harry’s parents talking, before Voldemort arrived, and it really didn’t sound like they’d found anything that was going to stop Voldemort’s curse. There’s a very powerful magical spell called the Reflecting Shield. I realised that I could cast it, and protect Harry – and that it would send Voldemort’s curse rebounding back on him – exactly as it was supposed to have happened in my reality. I started wondering if maybe I was supposed to cast it.”

“But that would have been changing the past,” said Hermione, thoughtfully. “And your headmaster said you mustn’t.”

“Exactly,” said Rick. “As it got closer and closer to the point where Voldemort was going to curse Harry, I became more and more convinced that if I didn’t cast the Reflecting Shield, Harry would be killed – and everything would change. Finally, I decided to cast it. But just before I did, I had an idea. I figured that if I did nothing, just like the headmaster said, and things didn’t work out the way they were supposed to, then I could always go back again and do it right – cast the Reflecting Shield.”

“Yes, that’s very clever. So what happened?” asked Hermione, totally absorbed, chewing nervously on her bottom lip.

“The last thing I saw was Voldemort casting the Killing Curse. Then I was thrown out of the past, and back to my own time. But when I got back to Hogwarts, I discovered that everything was different, that the reality I had come from had changed into this terrible one – all because Voldemort had killed Harry – and survived unscathed.”

“So why didn’t you go back, like you planned, and cast the Reflecting Shield?” asked Hermione.

“Because, to travel in time, I need my special wand, and I discovered that in this reality, I don’t have it – Voldemort’s got it,” said Rick dejectedly.

“Gosh! Yes, that was the flaw in your plan. If reality changed, then there was no guarantee that, in the new reality, you’d be able to travel back to that night, as you were able to in your old reality. You might even have been dead,” said Hermione, utterly fascinated by the complexities of Time Travel.

“Yes, I can see that now,” said Rick, bitterly. “But in the heat of the moment, when I had to make the decision, it didn’t occur to me. But, I have a plan to get my wand back from Voldemort, in a couple of weeks, at the equinox. If I succeed, then I’m going to fix things. Because now I know for sure that I was meant to cast the Reflecting Shield.”

Hermione seemed lost in deep thought for a while before completely surprising Rick. “Actually, I think your headmaster may have been right. You really weren’t meant to change anything.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Rick. “Of course I was. In my reality, Harry had been protected by something. It’s obvious now, that it must have been my Reflecting Shield. So I must have gone back in time and protected him, if you see what I mean....” finished Rick a bit lamely and unsure of himself.

“Yes, I do see what you mean,” said Hermione, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. “If Time Travel is possible – and from what you say, it certainly seems to be – then if someone goes back in time and does something, then that event has always happened, just like every other event that has happened.”

“Err, yeah,” said Rick, not quite able to keep up with Hermione. “But why did you say that I wasn’t meant to cast the Reflecting Shield?”

“Because you didn’t – obviously,” said Hermione.

But it wasn’t at all obvious to Rick. “But, I must have, or otherwise Harry wouldn’t have been alive in my reality, and Voldemort would have been ruling it.”

“But you did cast your Reflecting Shield,” explained Hermione. “Or at least you will have. But not that time – don’t you see? You are going to get your wand back, and go back to that night again.” explained Hermione, smiling confidently. “The second time you go back to that night when Voldemort tried to kill Harry, you will cast a Reflecting Shield – and you will save him

“Everything will happen the way it was supposed to happen, in your reality. You’ll see where the curse hits this evil wizard – just like you planned – and when you return to your own time – everything will be the way it was when you left it. Nothing will have changed. Not only will it be true that you had always gone back to that night and saved Harry, but it will also be true that you went back twice, and in between you lived a while in this other terrible reality.”

“You’re a genius, Hermione, you know that?” said Rick, shaking his head, amazed at the brilliance of her mind. “It’s been really nice meeting you, and all, in this reality, but to be honest, I could have done without it – err ... this reality, I mean.”

“I understand,” said Hermione, smiling. “But you never know, something might happen – or you might learn something – in this terrible reality, which will be very useful to you when you get back to your own reality. Time and space have always fascinated me. That’s

why I'm studying Physics at university. I'm really interested in Quantum Mechanics."

"But how could you be at university already?" asked Rick, amazed. "Surely, you're still at school?"

"Oh, I skipped a few years of school," explained Hermione, nonchalantly. "I'm in my second year of university. Tell me, what does it feel like to move through time? Does everything flash past you like a movie rewinding at high speed?"

"No, not at all," answered Rick, trying to think of how to explain it. "It's kind of like going to no place, where there are no sounds or light or dark or anything, really. I think of it as stepping out of time. Then I can step back into time at any point I want. It's a bit like the corridor of a railway carriage. All the compartments connect to it – but they're all in completely different times."

"Wow!" said Hermione, excitedly. "You know some physicists believe that there are a lot more than four dimensions – time is usually considered to be the fourth. They posit dozens of dimensions which we are unable to perceive. These other dimensions are right here, right now, right where we are. There could be anything in those dimensions – vast energy, mass, or nothing at all – a total void. One characteristic of at least some of these dimensions is thought to be that they don't have time – it's like everything is always happening. In fact, it sounds a bit like your railway carriage corridor."

Now it was Rick, who was struggling to wrap his mind around new and bizarre concepts. "Do you think when I travel in time, I actually move into some other dimension without time?"

"Exactly," said Hermione enthusiastically. "A dimension without time – which means that it's connected to every point in time in the four dimensions we are familiar with." Hermione was fascinated by the idea of Time Travel, and the possibility of going back in time and changing the whole thread of reality. Her mind moved from these abstract speculations to thinking about what it would mean if Rick succeeded in his plan. "I wonder how it will feel to me, if you succeed

in getting back your wand and changing this reality back to your old one?" mused Hermione.

"You'll be a witch again, Hermione – a very powerful witch," said Rick smiling at her.

Hermione tried imagining herself as a witch, doing magic, and being part of a magical world which wasn't evil, like the present one – with nice people ... like Rick. "So, that's how you knew my name. Are you and I friends in your magical world?"

"Err ... yeah," said Rick, becoming embarrassed and looking away.

"More than friends, perhaps?" asked Hermione, with a smile.

"You're my girlfriend, Hermione," said Rick, letting out a long sigh. "In fact you're more than my girlfriend. We have a special magical bond – we're very close. You have no idea how much I've missed you – well not you, I suppose, but her – my Hermione, these past few weeks. It ... it's been really wonderful talking to you like this, even though I know you're not really her – although, yeah, I suppose you are. It's very confusing.... I really need to get back to my school, now. I don't want to arouse suspicion. I need to stay focussed on getting back my wand – and fixing things."

"Yes, you do," said Hermione, smiling at him warmly. She could imagine being Rick's girlfriend – she really liked him. In fact, she'd never met anyone half as charming. She felt sad that he had to go, that she'd never see him again – well not in this reality, anyway.

"Could ... err ... would you mind if I ... I kissed you goodbye," stammered Rick, shyly. Sitting close to Hermione like this, he had been fighting the impulse to hug her and kiss her for the past hour – it hadn't been easy.

Hermione smiled at him. "Well, since you are my boyfriend, I suppose it would be alright," she said, grinning. It was just a quick kiss – after all, they were in a public park. "You can give me a longer kiss, when you get back to your own reality," said Hermione, smiling. "Good luck, I really hope you make it."

“Yeah, me too,” said Rick sighing. He took her hand in his and squeezed it. “Goodbye, Hermione – I sure hope I see you soon!”

Hermione looked one last time into his face – and then it was gone – she could still feel his hand in hers – then it too, was gone. She cautiously put her hand out to where Rick had been sitting. He was gone! Hermione sighed. This had been, without a doubt, the strangest, most amazing afternoon of her life. Well this life – anyway, she thought to herself.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 26 - Time and Time Again

Rick was beginning to worry. With only a day to go until the Spring Equinox, he had heard nothing about his forthcoming initiation as a Death Eater. With Barty Crouch's mysterious disappearance from school, there was no one to ask. Finally, a message arrived with Pansy's silver owl, requesting Rick to visit her that evening. As before, it included her Portkey brooch.

When Rick arrived in Pansy's apartment, she was not in a good mood. She was pacing back and forth with an ugly scowl on her face, muttering obscenities under her breath. "Blasted Draco!" she railed. "Do you know what that little bastard's gone and done? He's got his slimy father to postpone your Death Eater initiation!" she growled.

"What happened?" asked Rick, trying to hide his alarm.

"Well, Daddy got you on the list for the initiation. But, as head of the Secret Security Service and also Commander of the Death Eaters, Lucius Malfoy naturally sees the list and has to approve it. Apparently, when he saw your name on it he asked Draco about you. Draco discovered it was Daddy who pushed your initiation forward, and realised it had been at my request."

"Does Draco suspect there's something going on between us?" asked Rick, becoming worried.

"Of course," said Pansy. "Draco tried to get you removed permanently from the Death Eater candidate list. But since Daddy endorsed you, Lucius Malfoy can't do that. But he was able to get your initiation postponed until the next ceremony in six months' time, pending an investigation."

"Investigation?" asked Rick, trying hard not to betray his growing anxiety.

"As Commander of the Death Eaters, Lucius Malfoy was able to insist that since nothing is known about you, the Secret Security Service needs to investigate your background in New Zealand and check

your bloodlines and all that nonsense before you can be initiated. I'm sure it will all be OK; it's just a delaying tactic by Draco to spite me."

But Rick knew perfectly well that it would not be OK. If the Secret Security Service investigated him, as it seemed they would, he was dead. What on earth am I going to do now? he asked himself, beginning to panic.

"Draco was so unbearably pleased with himself when he told me. I absolutely loathe and hate him – that gloating, malevolent little bastard!" swore Pansy, stomping her foot in fury. She carried on her tantrum, fuming and swearing for several minutes before finally bringing her anger under control. She was determined not to let Draco ruin her plans. She placed her arms around Rick's waist, drawing him close, and gave him her most seductive smile. "Rick, darling, I can't wait another six months ... no one will possibly find out about us. Why should we let that horrible, nasty, mean little prat, spoil our pleasure?"

"Err ... Pansy," said Rick, nervously, as he extricated himself from Pansy's embrace. "If Draco already suspects us, there's no way I'm going to risk it. Draco has the resources of his father's Secret Security Service at his disposal to spy on us. If he manages to expose us, I'd have Draco Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy, plus your father, all after my skin. I'm sorry Pansy, but it's way too risky."

The following day was the Spring Equinox. Just before midday, Pansy and Draco set out from the castle for the Hogwarts gates. They were both dressed in exquisite ceremonial black robes, made of the finest silk. Draco was swaggering, with a smug grin on his face. Pansy was furious at him for blocking Rick's initiation and was attempting to ignore him, while simultaneously throwing him dirty looks from time to time. When they reached the gates, two large black hawks alighted – one on each gatepost, extending a leg, one to Pansy, the other to Draco. Attached to their legs were Portkeys to take them to the initiation ceremony. The Portkeys were in the shape of coiled-up snakes. They were jet-black, with blood-red eyes – glinting menacingly. Pansy stood in a huff, with her back to Draco

waiting impatiently for their Portkeys to be activated. Fortunately, it happened quite quickly.

Pansy and Draco found themselves in a small valley, which formed a natural amphitheatre. The sides were packed with more than a hundred Death Eaters. There were also members of the upper castes of the Magistocracy, who had been invited to witness the initiation of Pansy and Draco.

On one side of the valley was a specially raised platform. Seated upon it was the Minister of Magic, Cecil Parkinson and his entourage, which included his wife, and other members of the Parkinson family. Opposite them on the other side of the valley on another raised platform sat an arrogant and haughty Lucius Malfoy, his wife Narcissa, and their entourage. Most Death Eater initiations were short ceremonies, without large audiences. Usually they were witnessed only by a dozen or so Death Eaters. The Eternal Emperor was not fond of pomp and ceremony. In fact, he did not enjoy public appearances at all. But today, the heirs of the two leading families of the Magistocracy were to be inducted as his servants, so a little show to reinforce the primacy of Magistocracy in the scheme of things was unavoidable.

Pansy and Draco found themselves standing at the lower end of the valley with an escort guard of fifteen Death Eaters, all standing stiffly to attention behind them. Opposite them at the head of the valley was an elaborate stage, with a series of steps rising up to an enormous black throne. Fanned out on either side of the empty throne, were a dozen Death Eaters, standing motionless, like statues. Pansy surreptitiously took out her wand and pointed it at her arm where the Dark Mark would be burnt. She muttered a numbing charm. "What's the matter, Parkinson?" sneered Draco. "Afraid of a little pain?"

"You know very well that it's not a little pain, it's utterly excruciating," said Pansy, glaring hatefully at Draco. "I know Death Eaters are supposed to enjoy this kind of torture and are not allowed to block the pain – but Daddy got special dispensation for me to use a numbing charm. He had to – because I told him it was the only way I was going to be getting the Dark Mark. It's bad enough that I'll have that unsightly thing disfiguring my beautiful arm!"

“Shut up, Pansy!” spat Draco. “You’re such a wimpy little Daddy’s girl. Just wait till we’re married! I’ll teach you the meaning of obedience!” he said, smirking threateningly. “You won’t be able to wrap me around your little finger – like you do with your precious Daddy Dear!”

Pansy glared hatefully at Draco, and was about to tell him exactly what she thought of him, when a terrible wailing sound suddenly echoed through the valley. A loud explosion shook the ground, and an enormous Dark Mark appeared in the sky, casting a shadow over the small valley. The Dark Lord materialised upon his throne. The Death Eater on his right, who appeared to be the master of ceremonies, cried out in an amplified voice, “Fall to your knees, ye faithful servants of the Immortal One – our great and fearsome Eternal Emperor!” Everyone obediently went down on their knees and lowered their heads. For over a minute, they stayed motionless, kneeling in submission. The Eternal Emperor surveyed them all, grovelling before him, with a cruel, self-satisfied smile.

Finally, the Death Eater to the right of the throne cried out “Rise up, faithful servants of the Immortal One!” Everyone quickly resumed their seats. “Candidates, approach the throne!” ordered the Death Eater.

Pansy held out her arm regally to Draco, muttering to him under her breath, “Try to carry this off with some semblance of style and dignity, you little prat – we’re supposed to be putting on a show for the Magistocracy, you know ... the noble first family in waiting and all of that.” Draco didn’t reply. He dutifully took Pansy’s arm, assumed the appropriate facial expression of dignified superiority and smug self-importance, and led Pansy along the path that led up the valley to the foot of the stage, followed by their Death Eater escort. When they reached the stage, the master of ceremonies summoned Pansy to come forward.

Pansy obediently ascended the steps to the great throne and stopped, as directed, several feet in front of it. “Pansy Parkinson,” said the cold emotionless voice of the Eternal Emperor. “Approach!” Pansy stepped forward, keeping her eyes lowered subserviently. “Prostrate yourself before me; swear your undying loyalty to me; and beg to

receive my initiation, to become my faithful servant,” said the haughty imperial voice of the Eternal Emperor.

Pansy obediently prostrated herself as ordered, lying down flat on her front. She raised her head up towards the Eternal Emperor, and faultlessly repeated the ritual incantation, swearing life-long loyalty to the Eternal Emperor and begging him to make her one of his own elect Death Eaters.

“Rise!” commanded the Eternal Emperor, coldly. The master of ceremonies led Pansy to stand directly in front of the throne. He took her left wrist in a firm grip and pushing up the sleeve of her robe, extended her arm towards his master. The Eternal Emperor dispassionately touched the tip of his wand to the flesh of Pansy’s arm and exclaimed in an imperious voice, “Te Connecto Ego!” Despite the numbing charm, it hurt, and the smell of her own burning flesh disgusted Pansy’s. It took all of her breeding not to flinch and run. She followed the ritual formula of going down on her knees and kissing the hem of the Eternal Emperor’s robe. Then she thanked him for the great honour he had bestowed upon her. Finally, Pansy again swore fealty to him, before rising, and keeping her head bowed low, descended the steps backwards. It was forbidden to turn one’s back upon the Eternal Emperor.

When she reached the bottom of the steps, the master of ceremonies called Draco to come forward.

Draco ascended the steps to the great throne with dignity, stopping several feet away from it, as directed. “Draco Malfoy,” said the cold, harsh voice of the Eternal Emperor. “Approach!” Draco stepped forward. “Prostrate yourself before me; swear your undying loyalty to me; and beg to receive my initiation, to become my obedient servant,” said the Eternal Emperor, arrogantly. There was an impatient note in his voice which indicated that he was becoming irritated with this ceremony and fed up with the pomp and self-importance of the Magistocracy.

A small gasp escaped the lips of some of the audience, because Draco did not prostrate himself as ordered. Instead, he stood staring

at the Eternal Emperor. “No, I don’t think I will!” he said in a loud, bold voice. No one moved. Everyone was utterly stunned.

“Why should I, the heir of one of the Noblest Families, from the highest Pureblood caste of the Magistocracy prostrate myself before a Half-Blood like you?” he yelled. The stunned silence continued. The audience sat transfixed, holding their collective breath.

“How dare you speak such libellous treason?” demanded the Emperor, in a fearsome fury.

“But it’s not libel – it’s perfectly true,” retorted Draco, confidently. “Your father, Tom Riddle, was a Mudblood – you are the son of a Mudblood – your blood is filth. Members of the Magistocracy – purest of the Purebloods – why do you bow down to this filth? Why do you take orders from one with polluted blood, who should have been exterminated along with the rest of his filthy kind, long ago?”

The Eternal Emperor seemed to be having a fit, as he sat silent, his face red with fury. Everyone sat frozen, shocked into silence by Draco’s outrageous speech.

“Father! Minister of Magic Parkinson! All of you of that generation, why do you play this absurd charade?” demanded Draco. “Have you all been Memory Charmed or are you all too afraid to speak the truth? Surely you know that this person is no God! This is Tom Riddle, the Half-Blood, who was a student at Hogwarts many years ago. This is Tom Riddle, the Half-Blood, who changed his name to Lord Voldemort and waged a war against the Mudbloods, the Mixed-bloods, and those deluded Purebloods who defended them. Yes, it’s true he did us Purebloods a great favour – he got rid of the Mudbloods and Mixed-bloods who were polluting the wizarding world – but he didn’t quite finish the job! Today, I ask you all to rise up with me and finish it! Let us rid our world of this last piece of pollution ... this last bit of filth!”

Finally the Death Eaters on the stage recovered from their shock and moved towards Draco. “Halt!” ordered the Eternal Emperor, rising to his feet in an apoplectic fury. He pointed his wand at Draco and yelled, “Avada Kedavra!”

It was hard to tell what happened next. There was a flash of green and then a ball of fire and light engulfed the throne and Draco. It began spreading outwards, forming a whirlwind, which twisted around itself for a few moments, before ascending into the sky and disappearing. As it began to dissipate, the stunned Death Eaters and members of the audience were able, once more, to see the throne. It was empty. There was no sign of the Eternal Emperor – or of Draco Malfoy.

The first thing Rick did when he arrived at Godric's Hollow was morph back into his own form and transfigure Draco's elegant ceremonial robes into his old Gryffindor uniform, which he hoped desperately would turn out to be the appropriate attire for where he would eventually end up. Rick was shaking nervously, from his encounter with Voldemort. The whole thing had been utterly nerve-wracking, from beginning to end.

It started when he Apparated, invisibly, to Draco's apartment, shortly before Draco was due to start out for the Hogwarts gates with Pansy, to await the arrival of the Portkeys. Rick found out about the arrangements for getting to the initiation ceremony by scanning Pansy's mind the previous evening. He had stunned Draco, and then morphed himself to look exactly like him. Having a model right in front of him had been very helpful. He then dressed himself in Draco's elegant ceremonial robes, before going to meet Pansy at the entrance to their chambers.

Rick was trembling inside the whole time, afraid he wouldn't be able to carry off the pretence of being Draco. But, he had to try it – there was no other way to get close enough to Voldemort to get his wand back – before he was exposed. Pansy was so angry with him – well Draco – that she hardly looked at him or paid him any attention. Rick was ready to Memory Charm her, if necessary, but fortunately, his impersonation of Draco was good enough not to rouse her suspicion.

Rick's plan required Voldemort to cast the Killing Curse on him. He knew that nothing else would work. With Slytherin's cloak protecting

Voldemort, Rick wouldn't be able to touch him with any spells at all. In this reality, the cloak had not been damaged – yet. Nothing would penetrate it, not even a Summoning Charm on his wand. Before beginning his tirade against Voldemort, Rick had put up shields to deflect both curses and physical attacks – in case any of the Death Eater guard tried to attack him. But he was careful not to deploy his Reflecting Shield until the last moment, just as Voldemort was about to curse him.

Rick had considered Squibbing everyone present – bar Voldemort, whom he knew he couldn't Squib on account of the cloak. But in the end he decided against it. He didn't want Voldemort to suspect he was anyone other than Draco Malfoy, who represented no serious threat to him whatsoever. If Voldemort discovered that everyone had been Squibbed and that Draco was not, in fact, Draco, but some other wizard with great – and unknown – powers, he could have simply Apparated or Portkeyed away. That was Rick's greatest worry. He had to leave Voldemort feeling physically and magically secure – yet at the same time infuriate him to the point that he would want to personally kill 'Draco' – rather than simply ordering one of his Death Eaters to do it.

It had worked out pretty much to plan. His Reflecting Shield had sent Voldemort's Killing Curse back on him. Hidden by the resultant pyrotechnics, Rick had grabbed Voldemort's wand and Apparated directly to Godric's Hollow, which was once more in ruins and overgrown with weeds as it had been when he last left it. Rick reverently inspected the wand. There was no doubt; it was his wand – well Godric Gryffindor's wand, really.

Rick made himself invisible, then held up the wand, twisting it slightly as he closed his eyes and concentrated on going back in time. He decided to go back to just a few minutes before Voldemort cast the Killing Curse on Harry. He definitely didn't want to witness the tragic death of James and Lily Potter all over again – once was more than enough.

Rick paid careful attention to the process. He remembered Hermione's theory that he was, in fact, going into some timeless dimension, and he wanted to see how that stacked up with his

experience. It felt like he had stepped out of the present time and place to somewhere that was no-where and no-place. The analogy with stepping out of a compartment on the Hogwarts Express into the corridor, and then entering another compartment, was a good one.

The really interesting thing he discovered on this occasion was that if he wanted, he could stay in the corridor. He didn't have to enter another compartment. In Hermione's terminology, he was hanging out in the timeless dimension. It was a very strange dimension, because all he could perceive was his own mind. There were no other sensations whatsoever. He had no sense of having a body, there were no sounds, and there was nothing to see. It was just his mind, in a void. Interesting, thought Rick, but I've got a job to do – a very important job – it's time to go!

The first thing Rick saw was Harry, crying over the form of his dead mother. Voldemort was speaking to Harry, saying exactly the same words that Rick remembered from the first time he had been here.

Rick decided to Disapparate without immediately Apparating, as he had done the first time he travelled back to this night. He didn't want Voldemort to trip over him or to hear him. Then he was struck by a very strange thought. I must be here already, from the first time I travelled back in time to this night. How weird! I have to make sure that not only Voldemort doesn't notice me, I also have to make sure that 'I' – from the first time – don't notice me. But since I'm invisible and without a physical body, there's no chance of that, Rick mused.

The only way the 'me' from the first time, could know I am here is by projecting a magical map. But, 'I' didn't, so I suppose that means 'I' won't, thought Rick, bewildered, but fascinated, by the ramifications of being here twice. Anyway, I'm not sure a magical map would even show me in this bodiless state. I know – I'll try it!

Rick projected a magical map in his mind. Besides the names of Harry Potter and Tom Riddle, he saw his own name – twice. In fact he jumped a bit to his left because he was almost standing on 'himself'. Wow! I'm glad I didn't think of projecting a magical map the

first time I was here! I would have seen myself on it twice and been even more confused than I was already about what was going on ... and what I was supposed to be doing, thought Rick, shaking his head.

His thoughts were interrupted by Voldemort, who was talking to a distraught baby Harry. "Now, according to Pettigrew, she's used some blood magic on you, so perhaps I had better be careful. She wanted me to kill her – that much is obvious. Probably, she needed me to kill her – to activate the protection. But what does it do, I wonder? Pettigrew said that I would not be able to touch you; but there's no need to touch you to kill you with a curse my little enemy."

"I know – I'll try putting my mark on you, first. If I can do that, then I'll certainly be able to kill you." Harry was looking up at Voldemort, as he spoke to him. Voldemort pointed his wand at Harry's forehead and said "Signum Ego Concateno".

Everything happened exactly like the first time. Harry recoiled, writhing on the ground and screaming in agony from the pain. A bleeding zigzag lightening-bolt shaped wound appeared on Harry's forehead. Voldemort's thin lips curled into a cruel, self-satisfied smile as he prepared to cast the Killing Curse.

With a sense of great destiny, Rick cast his Reflecting Shield around baby Harry.

Moments later Voldemort pointed his wand at the baby, lying curled up in the foetal position and crying in pain – his little hands clutching at his forehead. "Avada Kedavra!" cried Voldemort victoriously. But the evil grin changed to an expression of horror and disbelief as his curse rebounded from baby Harry and came rushing back towards him. Voldemort instinctively tried to turn, but there was no time to dodge the curse. Rick saw the rebounding green light strike Voldemort on the side of the chest, four inches beneath his right armpit.

The effect of the rebounding curse was almost identical to the one that Rick had just witnessed in the other reality, when Voldemort had tried to kill him – thinking he was Draco Malfoy. Voldemort was engulfed in a ball of fire. Then a strange white light began spreading

from where he had stood. It formed itself into a whirlwind, which twisted around for a few moments, before disappearing into the sky.

Rick breathed a huge sigh of relief – Finally, I got it right – I hope! Baby Harry had been distracted from the painful wound on his forehead by Voldemort's impressive pyrotechnic display as he departed his mortal body for a long and unhappy exile from corporeal existence. Poor little Harry looked terribly confused and unhappy, apart from being in physical pain from the scar. Rick desperately wanted to pick him up and comfort him and tell him that everything was going work out alright – eventually. Of course he still had ten unloved and unhappy years of childhood to endure with the Dursleys, until his eleventh birthday, when he would finally discover the truth about who and what he really was – well, part of it, at least, thought Rick sadly.

No, I have to go, Rick told himself. I've done what I had to do. I haven't been thrown back to the future this time; I've still got my wand – so everything should be just the way it was when I left it, he thought, apprehensively Goodbye little Harry, Hagrid should be here before long to take care of you. See you soon ... I hope!

Rick twisted his wand and travelled back to his own time. He didn't linger along the way to observe the process of Time Travel, he was anxious to get back – and, hopefully, find the world just the way he'd left it. Godric's Hollow was again in ruins and overgrown with weeds. It looked just the way he remembered it, from the first time he had Apparated here from Hogwarts. So far, so good, thought Rick, before taking a deep breath and Apparating to the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

Rick looked around, and then breathed an enormous sigh of relief as he made himself visible. Professor Dumbledore, Harry, and Hermione were all there, looking exactly the same as they had when he'd left them. He had to fight hard to resist the urge to throw his arms around Hermione and hug her. He was so happy to see her, he just grinned at her stupidly. They all looked at him expectantly. To them, it was no more than a minute since he had gone.

"You have no idea how happy I am to find you all here like this," he said, letting out another huge sigh. "It feels like I've been gone for so long – well, it has been about five weeks for me," he said, by way of explanation.

"But how is that possible, Mr. Godfry?" asked Dumbledore gravely, rising from his seat. "I do hope you heeded my very clear warnings, and changed nothing."

"But I had to Professor," said Rick imploringly. "I didn't change anything the first time – only the second time. I had to – it was the only way to put things back the way they were ... supposed to be – and to get back to this reality."

"The second time?" asked Dumbledore severely. "What on earth have you done, Mr. Godfry? Please sit down, and explain what happened – everything!" said Dumbledore, resuming his seat and fixing his eyes piercingly upon Rick.

Rick explained what happened the first time he went back to Godric's Hollow – on that fateful Halloween night. He related the conversation between Harry's parents, which revealed that they had not found a way of protecting their baby from Voldemort. When Rick got to the point where Voldemort arrived, Harry became visibly tense. Rick tried to stick to the bare facts, and avoid describing the intense emotions he had witnessed – and experienced himself – as Voldemort first killed Harry's father and then his mother. When Rick mentioned that Voldemort had deliberately put the mark on Harry, Dumbledore interrupted him.

"What? Are you saying that Voldemort put the mark on Harry deliberately, as a test?" asked Dumbledore, intrigued.

"Yes sir, exactly," replied Rick. "Pettigrew warned Voldemort that Harry's mother had used some blood magic to protect him. Voldemort wanted to make sure that it wouldn't stop him from cursing Harry."

"Yes," mused the Headmaster, with a gleam in his eye, "that is a far more plausible explanation than the scar mysteriously appearing on

Harry as a result of Voldemort's Killing Curse. I wonder why that possibility never occurred to me before ... please continue."

Harry was becoming increasingly tenser as Rick drew closer, in his account, to the fateful moment when Voldemort cast the Killing Curse upon him. When he explained how he had been mysteriously thrown back to the present time just as Voldemort cried out the lethal words, the Headmaster interrupted again. "So, you didn't actually see where Voldemort was struck by the rebounding curse?"

"No, not the first —" began Rick.

But he was cut off by the Headmaster. "You say you were thrown back to the present. That can mean only one thing: Something changed! It was the change that threw you back to the present. And yet, we are all sitting here, fifteen years later and nothing is different – how very curious...."

"Professor," said Rick sighing, "everything changed!" I Apparated back to this office, and none of you were here. Professor Snape was here – or, should I say, Headmaster Snape.

There was a collective gasp from the Headmaster, Harry, and Hermione. Before they could ask him any further questions, Rick quickly began to describe his conversation with Headmaster Snape. They sat entranced for over an hour as he described the whole horrible, inhumane world he had lived in for the past five weeks, and how, disguised as Draco Malfoy, he had finally managed to get his wand back from Voldemort and return to Godric's Hollow to cast the Reflecting Shield.

When he had finished, the three of them sat completely stunned, attempting to assimilate and understand the meaning of what had happened to Rick.

Finally, Dumbledore snapped his fingers and a spread of sandwiches and pastries appeared on a low table before them, along with large glasses of pumpkin juice. "I think we have missed lunch," he said, smiling. "Perhaps we should all indulge in some refreshments while we chew over Mr. Godfrey's amazing story ... tuck in!"

Hermione, gulped down a couple of sandwiches, but she couldn't restrain herself any longer. "Professor, do you think Rick was somehow, always there on that night? I mean, that it was always him, who protected Harry with his Reflecting Shield?"

"Indubitably, without a doubt, Miss Granger," said the Headmaster smiling at her calmly, his blue eyes twinkling. "In fact, I think you – or at least the Hermione Granger in the other reality, explained it rather well. Can you please repeat exactly what she said to you, Mr. Godfry?"

Rick quickly swallowed his sandwich, before speaking. "She said, 'Everything will happen the way it was supposed to, in your reality. You'll see where the curse hits this evil wizard – just like you planned – and when you return to your own time – everything will be the way it was when you left it. Nothing will have changed. Not only will it be true that you had always gone back to that night and saved Harry, but it will be true that you went back twice, and that in between you lived a while in this other terrible reality.'"

"I couldn't have put it better myself," said Dumbledore smiling at Hermione. "Yes, it was Rick who saved Harry – it always was. Of course, we didn't know back then, that in fifteen years' time the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light would send us Rick Godfry to help fight Voldemort – and that he would go back in time to save Harry. We always thought it was his mother's protection that had saved him."

"But ... that's simply mind-boggling," said Hermione, shaking her head in disbelief. "They sent Rick to a world that would not be able to exist unless he appeared in it, and then went back fifteen years to save Harry. How can that be possible?" she asked, perplexed.

"The trick, my dear," explained the Headmaster, "is not to think of time as linear. Think of it as a road that you are walking along. Your experience is only of that part of the road you have walked along, and of those parts even further back, that others have walked upon and spoken of, or written about. Although no one knows anything about the road ahead, it already exists. Its nature is wholly determined by

the past – the part of the road that is known. Time Magic allows one to move instantly between different points along the road.”

“But that still doesn’t explain how the spirits of the great witches and wizards of the Light could send Rick to a reality that did not exist – that could not exist until he had appeared in it and had gone back and done something fifteen years in the past,” argued Hermione.

“Ah,” said Professor Dumbledore, “but the spirits who sent Mr. Godfry are not in time as we mortals are. To them, Time – past, present and future – is all happening at once. They perceive the entire road, if you will. Their decision and action in sending Mr. Godfry, changed the road. But, it was independent of time. It did not happen in 1996 any more than in 1981.

“Now I understand why the spirit of Godric Gryffindor asked me to give his wand to Mr. Godfry. It was with the express intention that he should use it to go back in time and save Harry from Voldemort’s Killing Curse. Saving Harry and averting the Nightmare Reality, was, I believe, one of the primary reasons for which Mr. Godfry was sent to our world.

“The very act of sending him, ensured that this reality, rather than the Nightmare Reality, would come to pass. Hence, it was possible to send him into this reality – even though its very existence depended upon him appearing in it – and then going back in time to make it possible.” Dumbledore smiled delightedly at the wonder of it all. For a minute or two no one spoke, as they tried to wrap their minds around what he had said.

Finally, Harry broke the silence. “So, despite your warnings to Rick, to change nothing, he was supposed to change the past. Should he have cast the Reflecting Shield the first time?”

“No!” gasped Hermione. “Absolutely not! Rick didn’t change the past, he just did exactly what he had always done – it just took him a while to find out what it was. And he definitely shouldn’t have cast the Reflecting Shield the first time!”

“Precisely!” agreed Dumbledore, nodding his head approvingly at Hermione. “Mr. Godfrey discovered that he had to protect Harry with a Reflecting Shield for this reality to occur. So, casting the shield was not changing the past – it was enacting it, exactly as it had to occur. Although your sojourn in the Nightmare Reality was most unpleasant,” he continued, looking at Rick, “it has, in fact, provided us with crucial information. Firstly, we have learned that Voldemort has a secret spy in our midst – Madame Hooch. Secondly, we have discovered that Harry cannot kill Voldemort.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Harry. “If I can’t kill Voldemort, because of this scar,” he said, pointing to his forehead, “that means Voldemort will kill me. One of us has to kill the other – that’s what the Prophecy says,” said Harry, sounding worried and confused.

“Ah, but the Prophecy is only that – a prophecy,” said Dumbledore. “It is not an immutable truth – which must occur, no matter what. Prophecies do not always prove to be correct.”

“But wait,” said Harry. “According to what Sna — err ... the Headmaster in the Nightmare Reality told Rick, this scar won’t actually stop me killing Voldemort – it just means that if I do, then I’ll die as well. If it’s the only way to rid the world of that monster, then I’ll just have to do it. If I don’t kill him, he’ll kill me, so I’m dead – no matter what I do. If I’m going to die anyway, then I’m going to do my damndest to take him with me....” said Harry with fatalistic determination.

“No, Harry! That’s utter nonsense!” said Hermione passionately. “You’re mixing everything up! The Prophecy could be completely wrong – and considering who gave it – it probably is! You may not be the one who kills Voldemort. And it may not be true that neither of you can survive while the other lives. In fact you have both been alive for sixteen years since the Prophecy was given – so how can it be correct?”

“Yeah, mate,” said Rick. “Just because Voldemort believes it, and is obsessed with it, doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“Exactly!” said Hermione. “But, Harry, what Professor Snape told Rick about your scar almost certainly is true – if you kill Voldemort, you’ll die. I know you’ve come to believe that it’s you who has to kill him; but apart from Trelawney’s ridiculous Prophecy, who says it has to be you? Please, Harry, don’t try to be the hero – let someone else get rid of Voldemort!” Turning to Professor Dumbledore, she continued. “Professor, it seems as though Voldemort – in this reality – is not aware of that particular side-effect of Harry’s scar.”

“Yes, Miss Granger,” said the Headmaster, staring off into the distance, thinking it over. “If Voldemort knew, he would certainly have let Harry – and everyone else – know. He would be crowing over his coup. This will, of course, have to remain a secret among the four of us.”

“Umm, Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry slowly. He was obviously still thinking over what he wanted to say. “This morning, when Voldemort pulled Rick and me into the future and we were standing right in front him, my scar didn’t hurt at all. I couldn’t even feel it. It really surprised me, because every other time I’ve been anywhere near him, it’s been unbearable. Do you think it might have something to do with Time Travel?”

“Yes, of course!” exclaimed Hermione, jumping in before the Headmaster could speak. “Your scar connects you to the Voldemort in this time and this reality. That future Voldemort would have a connection to the Harry of his time, but not with you. That must be the reason, Professor,” said Hermione turning to the Headmaster.

“Yes, most probably,” agreed the Headmaster. “Although, it is hard to be certain – the scar which links Harry to Voldemort is quite unique. There are no precedents to go by.”

“So,” said Harry, “if I went back just a little way in time – perhaps just fifteen or twenty minutes – I might be able to kill Voldemort without —”

“No, Harry.” said Dumbledore calmly, but forcefully. “That would be most foolhardy – for two reasons. Firstly, we do not know for certain that it would render you immune from that particular property of your

scar. You were not only in a different time this morning, you were also in, what I hope will transpire to be, a different reality. You might well die as a result of killing Voldemort. Secondly, you would be making a fundamental change to the past – the consequences of which could be disastrous.”

“But, you said yourself, that if one goes back no more than an hour or two, and acts cautiously, it’s possible to make a change, without causing any serious side-effects,” protested Harry.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore looking at him sternly. “It is not just a matter of the length of time one goes back. Voldemort’s death – whenever it should occur – will be a pivotal event in the history of the wizarding world. It is not some minor peripheral event – such as when you and Miss Granger saved Sirius’ and Buckbeak’s lives. Too many chains of cause and effect in our world run through that critical point – Voldemort’s death. To precipitate it by travelling back to the past, even a short way, would unquestionably, be courting calamity.”

“In any case, Harry,” said Hermione, “our priority, from what you and Rick learned this morning from Voldemort, is to find a way of dealing with the Dementors. If we can’t solve that problem then ... well, you saw and heard yourself, what will happen....”

Everyone was silent for a minute or two as they focussed on the spectre of the destruction of Hogwarts.

“We probably have a little time up our sleeves,” said Dumbledore, finally. “My guess is that Death Eaters with children at Hogwarts will request that they be allowed to come home for the Easter holidays, and then prevent their subsequent return to Hogwarts at the commencement of the final school term. The attack will, I believe, come immediately after the Easter holidays, as the absence of the Death Eaters’ children will be a clear indication that an assault is imminent. Voldemort will want to strike quickly, before we have time to take defensive measures.”

“Umm, Professor Dumbledore, why do wizards celebrate Easter?” asked Harry, curiously. “I know it’s nothing to do with what we’ve

been talking about, but it's always puzzled me. I mean, wizards aren't Christians, are they?"

"That's a very good question, Harry," answered the Headmaster, smiling. "Witches and wizards do not believe in the bible – or the God of Christianity as revealed by it. And, of course, only a minority of magical folk live in Christian countries, anyway. However, almost all magical folk do believe in a unifying energy or intelligence of some kind in the universe. I like to think of it as the same thing that Christians call God, Moslems call Allah, Hindus call Brahma, and so on. Every religion has its own name for It, and its own particular ideas regarding its nature.

"Probably, none of them are completely correct in how they describe It – nor, for that matter, completely incorrect. Everyone, I believe, both magical and non-magical folk alike, is able to experience It – this cosmic presence – to a greater or lesser degree. However, because it cannot be directly perceived, it is depicted in so many different ways by the various religions of the world.

"It never ceases to amaze me that so many Muggles born in Christian countries believe unquestioningly in Jesus and the God they have been taught about; while those born in Muslim countries are equally unquestioning in their belief in the Prophet Mohammed and Allah. It never seems to occur to them, that if they were born in a country of another faith, they would believe in it just as fervently. If only they didn't have to fight for their sectarian beliefs ... the world would be a far happier place."

"But, then why does the Wizarding world celebrate Easter, Professor, if they don't believe in the bible?" asked Hermione, puzzled, as she attempted to steer the Headmaster back to the original question. The sectarian religious beliefs of Muggles and their disastrous consequences in history, was a topic of particular fascination for him.

"Because Jesus, like Moses, Mohammed, Zoroaster, the Buddha, and many others, who are revered as great prophets, saints, and the like, by the world's religions, is considered by the wizarding world, to have been a great wizard," explained Dumbledore.

“Of course!” exclaimed Hermione, as the penny dropped. “All the miracles he performed were magic! Walking on water; the loaves and the fishes; healing the sick. My goodness! Perhaps it was Jesus who blessed me with healing powers!”

“That is indeed very likely, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore smiling. “Wizards consider Jesus to be the greatest Healer in history. His crucifixion is viewed as akin to witch-burning. The Muggles were afraid of his magical powers and attempted to kill him. But of course, being a very powerful wizard, he survived both crucifixion and entombment, giving rise to the Christian belief that he died and then rose from the dead. What the wizarding world celebrates at Easter is that Jesus did not, in fact, die. There are, of course, many stories from various parts of the world, where Jesus was reported to have lived at various times after his crucifixion – including England. It can be assumed that he lived a very long, happy ... and magical life.”

“Speaking of Easter ... I would request the three of you to remain at Hogwarts over the Easter holiday this year. Until then,” said the Headmaster, looking first at Rick and then Hermione, “please focus your minds on how we might deal with the Dementors. I, too, shall be researching the subject. Harry, I would like you to continue working hard on your Animagus transformation – it remains our plan of last resort, to deny Voldemort that which he desires above all else – your death,” he said gravely. Then, rising from his chair, he added, “Now, if you would please excuse me, I need to have a little chat with our ex-Flying Mistress, Madame Hooch.”

As Harry, Hermione, and Rick rose to leave, Harry asked, “Who will referee tomorrow’s Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, Professor?”

“Oh, dear,” said Dumbledore. “I believe I shall also have to have a chat with Professor McGonagall. She was a very fine Chaser in her day, you know, renowned for her speed and agility. Now, what was it, they used to call her on the Quidditch pitch?” he asked himself, stroking his bearded chin, as he searched his memory. “Oh, yes, now I remember – Nimble Minnie ... although I would not suggest that you address her as such,” he added, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement.

Valued Reader,

I have spoiled you ... posting 26 chapters in almost as many days.

Alas ... all good things must come to and end ... we have now caught up with the betas, who are a couple of chapters behind me. So, the remaining five or six chapters will be posted about once a week.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ... you never know, it may just spur me to go that little bit faster.

Chapter 27 - Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw

Rick and Hermione seated themselves apart from the rest of the Gryffindor supporters who had come to cheer their team on against Ravenclaw. They were in the back corner of the Gryffindor stand, where Rick would not be too conspicuous if he had to act. He was hoping there would be no repeat of the drama which had marked the match against Slytherin. It was another clear, crisp, sunny winter's day – perfect weather for Quidditch.

A loud buzz rose from the stunned spectators when Professor McGonagall flew onto the pitch to referee the game. The news that Madam Hooch had been dismissed had not yet got out. From the severe tone in which she gave the pre-match injunction about fair play and observing the rules, it was obvious to all, that Professor McGonagall was going to be very strict. Nobody – Gryffindors included – would be getting away with any foul play or infringements of the rules today. She blew her whistle shrilly, throwing the Quaffle high in the air, to commence the game.

Ginny immediately gained possession of the Quaffle and streaked away towards the Gryffindor goals. She dodged a vicious Bludger before reaching the goals, where she feinted right, brilliantly wrong-footing the Ravenclaw Keeper before slamming the Quaffle through the left-most hoop. Ecstatic cheers rose from the Gryffindor stand. But Ginny wasn't finished yet. She was in great form, and within three minutes of the start of the match had scored as many goals to put Gryffindor well in the lead.

But the Ravenclaw chasers were not going to let Gryffindor have it all their own way. After Ginny's third goal they got possession of the Quaffle and began peppering their own goal. They were good, and Ron had his work cut out protecting his hoops. So far, he had successfully beaten off their fierce attacks.

Rick noticed Harry employing his usual strategy of staying high up above the game. He was darting about on his broom, his eyes constantly scanning for the golden gleam of the Snitch – just like a hawk, searching the ground for prey. Cho Chang, had also adopted her usual strategy, when playing against Harry – she was shadowing

him. He had the keenest eyes of any Seeker she had played against, and was odds-on to spot the Snitch first. She was ready to follow him – and maybe ‘get lucky’. The Snitch often behaved erratically and it might just make a move that favoured her.

Hermione wasn’t all that interested in Quidditch ... just so long as Gryffindor won. She was quizzing Rick in detail about his encounter with her in the Nightmare Reality. Naturally, she was fascinated to know all about herself. It was probably exactly how she would have been, had she never received her Hogwarts’ letter. She was particularly interested to hear what she had said to Rick about Time Travel and other dimensions. It seemed to her that it might somehow be important.

With his photographic memory – courtesy of Rowena Ravenclaw – Rick could repeat back to Hermione, word for word, everything she had told him in the Nightmare Reality.

“You said: ... some physicists believe that there are a lot more than four dimensions – time is usually considered to be the fourth. They posit dozens of dimensions which we are unable to perceive. These other dimensions are right here, right now, right where we are. There could be anything in those dimensions – vast energy, mass – or nothing at all – a total void. One of the characteristics of some of these dimensions is thought to be that they don’t have time – it’s as if everything is always happening. In fact, it sounds a bit like your railway carriage corridor.”

“Then,” said Rick, “I asked her ... err, I mean, you: Do you think when I travel in time, I actually move into some other dimension without time?”

“You replied: Exactly, a dimension without time – which means that it’s connected to every point in time in the four dimensions we are familiar with.”

Hermione sat in silence, lost deep in thought for several minutes. The game meanwhile was progressing at a furious pace, high above them. Ravenclaw had finally managed to score a couple of goals against Ron, but then Ginny struck back, adding four quick goals, to put

Gryffindor fifty points clear. The Gryffindor supporters were singing enthusiastically:

“Ginny Weasley, Quidditch Queen,

Greatest Chaser ever seen,

Ravenclaw don’t stand a chance,

When she does her Quaffle dance.”

“Rick, since you brought Harry back from the future with you,” said Hermione, deep in thought and oblivious to what was happening on the Quidditch pitch, “it means that you can take others with you when you travel in time – just like you do when you Apparate – right?”

“Umm, yes, I guess so,” answered Rick. “What did you have in mind? Do you fancy paying Circe a visit, to get some tips on turning men into pigs ... and maybe some roast pork recipes, too?” asked Rick with a cheeky grin.

“Don’t be silly!” scolded Hermione. She was onto something, and in far too serious a mood for Rick’s silly jokes. “I don’t want you to take me to the past ... or to the future. But I’d like to see what this dimension without time is like. When I used the Time-Turner in third year, I never experienced anything like that at all. There must be something fundamentally different about the way you travel in time, and what happens with a Time-Turner. Could you take me to this timeless dimension, Rick? Just for a little while ... please?”

“Why, sure,” answered Rick. “Anytime you like.”

“How about now, then?” asked Hermione, eagerly.

“Yeah, I guess it should be alright,” said Rick. “If we return to the exact moment we left, we won’t even appear to have been gone, if anyone’s looking at us,” said Rick.

“Just don’t return us to before we left,” said Hermione grinning. “I don’t want to find myself sitting in my own lap!”

Rick laughed as he took Hermione's hand in his, took his wand from his robes and twisted it. Rick didn't know how long they were out of time or in the timeless dimension, before he brought them back.

"Wow!" said Hermione, in wonderment. "That was absolutely amazing – I've never experienced anything like it before...." She was silent for a while as she searched for concepts to encapsulate the experience. "It felt like I was nowhere at all – or like nothing existed at all – it was just an empty void. The only thing there, was me – well, not even me, really. I had no sense of my body at all – only my mind. I wasn't aware of anything else at all, not even you. Were you aware of me, Rick?"

"No," answered Rick, shaking his head. "It's just like you described it. There was just my mind, and ... nothing else ... just this vast void."

"Yes," answered Hermione, slowly thinking it over. "But vast isn't quite the right word, is it? A void has no dimensions at all. A void is not just without Time, it's also without Space. It's a very strange contradiction. This place out of time, where you took me, has no Time – yet it's connected to all Time. It has no dimensions – yet it's infinite ... it's sort of everything and nothing – everywhere and nowhere – all time and no time," she said, shaking her head in wonder. "I certainly never experienced anything remotely like it when I used the Time-Turner. Yet, it seems certain that all Time Travel involves passing through this Timeless Dimension. Probably, I transited it too quickly to notice it – because with a Time-Turner you have no control over the process. Whereas, with your wand, you do – you're able to linger in the Timeless Dimension if you want – and to observe it."

Hermione's musings were interrupted by loud cheering. Looking up she saw Harry, streaking high above the Quidditch field chasing the golden Snitch. Cho was struggling to keep up with him, as he pulled away from her with the superior speed of his Firebolt. The Snitch was struggling too – it wasn't giving Harry an easy time today, as it swerved this way and that, one minute diving, the next soaring. But Harry, with his brilliant flying skills, was staying with it, and closing on it, not letting it out of his sight for a moment.

“Go, Harry, go! Go, go, go!” screamed the Gryffindors and many others besides, as Harry reached out his gauntleted hand and plucked the struggling Snitch out of the air. As he watched, Rick was lost in memories of baby Harry, and his father flying him around the lounge room, chasing after his own little Snitch. How proud of him James and Lily would have been, reflected Rick, shaking his head sadly.

But Rick’s flashback was cut short by screams. The sky seemed to have exploded around Harry sending out billowing white clouds that were rapidly enveloping the whole Quidditch field. It was impossible to see anything. Rick felt a sense of panic. If Harry had been knocked from his broom, it would be impossible to save him as he had in the match against Slytherin. Without being able to see him, there was no way he could cast a spell to catch him.

The scene was one of pandemonium with students screaming; not knowing what to do, as the white clouds spread out, enveloping them, before eventually thinning, and finally dissipating. As the clouds cleared, all eyes looked up, searching for Harry. Nervously, Hermione scanned the sky for him. She spotted Cho and the other Quidditch players flying cautiously back to land – but Harry was nowhere to be seen. Apprehensively, she lowered her eyes to the Quidditch pitch, afraid of what they would find there – she dreaded that it would be his broken body. But, mercifully, there was just a solitary broom – Harry’s Firebolt – lying on the pitch.

“Rick, where can he be?” screamed Hermione frantically. “Do you think he’s been abducted to the future by —” But, then she stopped, as she realised that she was talking to empty space – Rick wasn’t there. Looking upwards, she saw a falcon, furiously beating its wings, rising rapidly up into the sky. Hermione felt sick with fear. If Harry had been abducted again, either to the future or to Voldemort, in the present time, how could Rick possibly find him? It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The Headmaster’s magically amplified voice burst in on Hermione’s frantic and fearful thoughts. “All students, including Quidditch players, are requested to return immediately to their respective common

rooms and to remain there until advised otherwise, by their Head of House.”

Hermione found Ginny, Ron, and Padma, walking sombrely back to the castle. Ron was in the middle, with an arm around each girl. Hermione walked next to Ginny, who was still in her Quidditch uniform, looking tired and worried. Hermione put her arm around her. “Hermione,” cried Ginny, “what do you think can have happened to Harry? I’m so worried.” Ginny was in tears, and clearly distraught.

“I don’t know, said Hermione,” fighting back her own tears. “He just disappeared into thin air. I’m just so afraid that ... that Voldemort has got him. Where else can he be?” she managed to blurt out, before bursting into tears.

“Where’s Rick?” asked Ron, in a husky voice, thick with emotion.

“I don’t know ...” said Hermione, between sobs. “I suppose he’s looking for Harry ... but where would he start?”

Ron just shook his head hopelessly, staring at the ground as they walked back to the castle. Hermione was sure she saw a tear fall from his eye.

After making the Animagus transformation into a Peregrine Falcon, Rick beat his wings furiously to gain altitude as quickly as possible until he gained a commanding view over the Hogwarts grounds. Finding no sign of Harry, apart from his broomstick far below on the Quidditch pitch, he immediately headed out over the Forbidden Forest. Has Voldemort pulled him through another Time Portal? he asked himself.

Instinctively, he headed towards where Harry had been pulled the previous morning. He scanned the treetops as he flew, but he couldn’t see Harry anywhere. When he got to the place where the Time Portal had been, he could see nothing – there was no black cloud – there was nothing at all. Rick was lost for what to do next. Was the Snitch a Portkey? he wondered. If it was, then Harry could

be hundreds of miles away by now – how am I going to find him? Rick asked himself desperately.

Just then, Rick's falcon instincts cut in, as he saw, out of the corner of his eye, something approaching him fast. Rick dived and swerved, before looking around to identify what had been closing on him. Then he saw it – a Golden Eagle – with distinctive green eyes. In that instant Rick understood how Harry had saved himself from plummeting to his death on the Quidditch pitch in front of the whole school – he had succeeded, just in the nick of time, to master the Animagus transformation. If Rick had been himself, he would have whooped for joy. Instead, he soared high, following Harry.

It was soon evident to Rick, that Harry had shrugged off any lingering fear and worry about what had happened on the Quidditch field, and was revelling in the ecstasy of avian flight. In fact, he seemed to be having the time of his life, as he rose on the wind soaring high above the forest with his massive wings stretched wide, before dropping into a vertical dive, then pulling out of it and using his momentum to shoot out horizontally at great speed, banking and turning. Harry was totally lost in the joy and delight of flying.

Rick had no trouble keeping up with Harry, because while a Golden Eagle was considerably larger and more powerful than a Peregrine Falcon, it was not quite as fast. Rick was soon caught up in Harry's delight, and the pair of them played aerobatic games together for at least a quarter of an hour, before Rick remembered that everyone at Hogwarts must be thinking that Harry had been abducted by Voldemort and was probably dead by now. He eventually managed to convince Harry that they should head back to the castle. They came down on the West Tower and transformed.

Harry was grinning from ear to ear, like a Cheshire Cat. "That was the most wonderful experience of my life, Rick," he said, ecstatically. "Even better than the first time I flew on a broom, in my first year."

"Hey, what happened to your hand?" asked Rick with concern, pointing at Harry's right hand. The gauntlet had been blown away from the palm and Harry's hand was badly burnt.

“Ouch! It hurts like hell, said Harry, wincing and shaking his hand about. Just after I grabbed the Snitch it exploded, sending out all this white smoke – or something. I don’t know what kind of spell it was, but somehow it ripped my broom out from under me. I began falling downwards, into this white cloud. I realised that the only way to save myself was to transform into an eagle. I concentrated with all my might and ... it just happened ... I did it! I spread my wings to stop my fall and then began flapping them to gain altitude. Soon I was high above the white cloud and the Quidditch pitch. It was so amazing, to fly like a bird ... at last, I just forgot about everything.... But now I’ve changed back, my hand is hurting really badly – is there anything you can do, Rick?” he asked, grimacing with pain.

Rick didn’t need to bother hiding his magical powers from Harry anymore – now that Voldemort had let the cat out of the bag. He didn’t even bother pretending to use his wand. He pointed a finger at the gauntlet and it was gone. Rick took hold of Harry’s wrist and carefully examined his hand. The palm was very badly burnt. He concentrated on Harry’s hand for a moment and it was healed.

“Thanks,” said Harry gratefully, holding his hand up in front of his face and examining it appreciatively. “How am I going to explain my miraculous survival without giving away my Animagus ability? Have you got any ideas?”

“Well,” said Rick, after thinking it over for a few moments. “How about you claim that you’ve just mastered an advanced Hover Charm? You can say it’s really hard to control your motion, and you ended up coming down somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, and you only just got back to the castle. Err ... it’s sort of true in a way – I mean you were hovering over the Forbidden Forest ... after all. We better go to Dumbledore right away to let him know you’re OK.” Rick closed his eyes for a minute, to check the Headmaster’s office. “Unfortunately, he’s not alone. So just tell him the story for now – he’ll figure it out anyway.”

“How do you know he’s not alone, Rick?” asked Harry, mystified.

“Well, you know your Marauders’ Map?” answered Rick. “I can sort of ... err ... project one, in my mind.”

“Wow!” said Harry. “That’s amazing – can you do it in other places too?”

“Err, yeah,” said Rick, “anywhere, I guess. While I was checking the map, I spotted a secret passage which should get us to Dumbledore’s office without being spotted; come on, let’s go.” They went through a doorway and then down a tightly spiralling stone staircase. At the bottom they set out along a deserted corridor. When they came to a heavy tapestry, Rick grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him behind it and into a dark narrow passageway, which they illuminated with their wands. Rick led the way, taking various connecting passages until they came out through a hidden doorway into the corridor that led to the Headmaster’s office.

“Fickle Fudge,” said Rick, when they reached the entrance. The stone gargoyle jumped aside, and Harry and Rick stepped onto the moving stone staircase. Harry knocked on the door to the Headmaster’s office. They heard footsteps approaching the door. It swung open to reveal a very surprised Severus Snape.

“Potter!” he exclaimed. Then spotting Rick standing behind Harry, he added in a suspicious tone, “Now why am I not surprised to see you, Godfry? Whenever the unexpected occurs ... you can always be expected to turn up ... how very, very, predictable.”

“Please show them, Severus,” came the delighted voice of the Headmaster. Snape reluctantly stepped aside to allow Harry and Rick to enter the office.

“Harry!” exclaimed Dumbledore with unconcealed joy. He had risen from his chair, and came around his desk to stand in front of Harry. His blue eyes were twinkling with happiness. Apart from Snape, the other three Heads of House were also present. Professor McGonagall jumped from her chair, wiping her swollen red eyes with a tartan handkerchief, before pocketing it. She placed an affectionate hand on Harry’s shoulder and smiled at him warmly.

“My goodness, Potter, you gave us all a dreadful fright,” she said, sounding extremely relieved. “Are you hurt? What on earth happened

out there on the Quidditch pitch?" All five professors were now staring at Harry, expectantly.

"Err ... it was the Snitch," said Harry. "It exploded in my hand, and my broom was ripped out from under me and I started falling...."

Snape, who had remained standing, now moved closer to Harry. "And how, exactly did you manage to come back to earth in one piece from several hundred feet up in the air – without a broom, Potter?" asked Snape, staring hard at Harry before allowing his eyes to drift to the left and rest suspiciously upon Rick.

"Err ... I used a Hover Charm, sir," answered Harry

"A Hover Charm?" repeated Snape, with obvious disbelief. "I have never heard of a Hover Charm that one could cast upon oneself – nor, for that matter, of any that do more than levitate an object a few feet. Have you, Filius?" he asked, turning for confirmation to the diminutive Charms Master.

"Well ..." answered Professor Flitwick, pausing a moment to consider the question. "There are certain very advanced charms that can be employed in duelling, which allow the caster to fly up in the air a short distance, to dodge a curse. But there is nothing I know of, that would save someone falling from a broom several hundred feet up in the air."

Snape, rounded on Harry again, with a satisfied smile on his face. "I think you are going to have to do a little better than that, Potter, if you ___"

"Now, Severus," interjected the Headmaster, "there are more things under the sun than either you or I – or any of us in this room – know about. Just because no-one has heard of this charm, does not mean, that it does not exist. I, for one, am more than happy to accept Mr. Potter's explanation." He turned and resumed his seat behind his desk, noting Rick's wink as he sank into his chair. He nodded slightly back, indicating that he understood perfectly, how Harry had saved himself.

“Perhaps Potter would care to explain where he has been for the past half-hour while the whole school has been in a panic – and in mourning for him?” demanded Snape, choosing a different avenue of attack, since he could not openly contradict the Headmaster.

“Err, it’s very difficult to control yourself with this Hover Charm, sir,” answered Harry, trying to keep his voice steady. “I, err, ended up floating above the Forbidden Forest, where I finally managed to come down. It took me a while to find my way out and, err ... get back to the castle.”

Snape was an expert at reading body language. He was certain Potter was lying. “Hold out the hand with which you caught the Snitch, Potter,” he demanded. Harry held out his right hand. “Where is the gauntlet?” demanded Snape, suspiciously.

“I – I don’t know, sir, said Harry. I guess it was blown off when the Snitch exploded.”

“And yet there is not a single scratch, burn, or mark of any kind on your hand – extraordinary! How would you explain that, Mr. Potter?” asked Snape, his eyes narrowing into a hard cold glare.

But before Harry could answer, Professor McGonagall stepped defensively in front of Harry, glaring at Snape. “That’s quite enough, Severus! You are behaving as if Potter here was responsible for what happened today during the Quidditch match. It is obvious to any fair-minded person, that he was the victim – not the perpetrator. It was clearly not some silly schoolboy prank – but rather, an attempt upon his life. I think Mr. Potter has suffered enough trauma for one day, without being subjected to your adversarial style of cross-examination. Please leave him alone, Severus,” said McGonagall, in a voice that brooked no argument. She stood her ground, glaring at Snape until he backed off and angrily resumed his seat.

Dumbledore sat calmly behind his desk, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement, and the start of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He was obviously enjoying the sight of Minerva McGonagall in mother-hen mode putting Severus Snape in his place. “I think we can all agree on one thing,” said the Headmaster, gaining everyone’s

attention. "This was undoubtedly another – thankfully unsuccessful – attempt by Voldemort on the life of Harry Potter."

"As you know," he continued, "Madam Hooch, whom I dismissed yesterday, has been spying for Voldemort for many years. After interrogating her, I concluded that she had done no more than spy – that she had not been involved in any ... overt activities. This explains how she succeeded in remaining undetected at Hogwarts for so long. But, due to a series of setbacks and failures, Voldemort has become desperate of late. Consequently, it seems he pressed Madam Hooch into active service, and had her substitute the tampered Snitch for the one which was to be used in today's match. It was, after all, almost a forgone conclusion that Mr. Potter would catch it," he said smiling at Harry. Snape could be heard muttering a disgusted humph, under his breath.

"Minerva and Filius," he continued, "I would like you to check over all of the school's Quidditch equipment, including the school brooms. Please check everything that Madam Hooch has had access to. All Quidditch matches, practices, and flying lessons are postponed until the task is complete."

"But, Professor," exclaimed Harry, "There's the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match in three weeks and then Gryffindor-Hufflepuff a couple of weeks after that."

"Don't worry, Potter," said Professor McGonagall reassuringly, "it shouldn't take us more than a week or two. I'm sure that the Quidditch program will not be seriously disrupted. Oh, and by the way – congratulations on your win today."

"What?" asked Harry in surprise.

"Well, you caught the Snitch ... even if it did subsequently explode. According to the rules of Quidditch, the match ends at the moment the Seeker catches the Snitch – so the result stands. The final score, I believe, was two hundred and fifty to thirty – in Gryffindor's favour – which puts Gryffindor in the lead for the House Cup," she added, grinning smugly at Snape.

“Congratulations, Mr. Potter,” said Dumbledore, beaming at Harry. “May I suggest that you and Mr. Godfrey return to your common room, and let your friends and housemates know you are alive and well. They will, no doubt, have all been very worried since your disappearance. I am certain they will want to celebrate your safe return – along with Gryffindor’s victory today. I am sure your Head of House will permit you and your housemates a celebratory party,” he added with a smile, glancing towards Professor McGonagall, who nodded her agreement.

“Err ... thank you, Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry, feeling relieved to escape any further interrogation by Snape.

When Harry entered the Gryffindor common room, all hell broke loose. The students had been sitting around in small subdued groups, speculating on Harry’s fate. The consensus was that this must surely be the end of the road for the Boy Who Lived. No other conclusion seemed possible. The mood was one of gloom and despair. Without Harry Potter, the future looked bleak indeed. It felt as if the battle was already over – and the Dark Lord had won.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were sitting together. None of them could think of anything positive to say, so they just sat in silence. Hermione and Ginny were both red-eyed and tearful. This was a moment they had all dreaded, but hoped, somehow, would never arrive.

When the portrait hole swung open and Harry walked in, there was a moment of stunned silence. Then everyone was talking excitedly at once. Hermione and Ginny both rushed at Harry and embraced him so hard, he could barely breathe. When he smiled at Ginny, she lost all control and kissed him soundly on the lips – much to the delight of the onlookers. Even Ron, who had rushed over to his best friend, wasn’t annoyed, or trying to drag her away from him. “What the hell happened to you, mate?” he asked in a relieved voice. It was the question on everyone’s lips.

Rick jumped up onto a table, and, remembering to use his wand, performed the Sonorous Charm. He knew Harry didn’t want to have

to lie to the whole house and would be embarrassed having to address them all, so he decided to spare him.

“Everyone, Harry’s just been through a pretty rough time, so please give him a break and let him relax a bit. I know you’re all curious to know what happened out there, on the Quidditch pitch. He’s just had to go over the whole story in the Headmaster’s office. I was there, so I’ll repeat what he said – OK?”

Everyone yelled out their agreement, prompting Rick to continue.

“I think we all saw Harry catch the Snitch,” said Rick. “A few seconds later, it exploded in his hand. White stuff came out of it, making that huge white cloud, which spread out to cover the Quidditch field and the spectator stands. When the Snitch exploded, Harry’s broom was ripped out from under him —” Rick was cut off by a collective gasp from his listeners.

“I guess you all saw his broom on the Quidditch pitch, and are wondering how Harry managed to escape falling to his death – which, by the way, was the plan. The tampered Snitch came courtesy of Voldemort.” There was a collective gasp when Rick said the dreaded name.

“So how the hell did Harry manage to save himself from falling?” asked Dean Thomas.

“He used a very advanced Hover Charm, to float back down,” answered Rick. His words were greeted by cries of surprise, disbelief, and admiration.

“Err ... Harry has been working on this charm for quite a while,” continued Rick, raising his voice above the hubbub. “It’s very hard to control your direction, apparently, and Harry ended up floating out over the Forbidden Forest, where he finally landed. It took him quite a while to find his way out, and walk back to the castle.”

Everyone began talking at once about the amazing turn of events and how Harry, against all the odds, had cheated death – and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named – once again.

"There's one more thing," yelled Rick, ramping up his Sonorous Charm. "Professor McGonagall has given us permission to have a party – to celebrate Harry's safe return – and also Gryffindor's Quidditch victory today. Since Harry caught the Snitch, and the game was over before it exploded, Professor McGonagall has declared Gryffindor the winner – two hundred and fifty points to Ravenclaw thirty – which puts us in the lead for the House Cup!"

The common room erupted into cheering and rejoicing – the mood was in total contrast to that of five minutes earlier. Dean and Seamus approached Harry. "Well done, mate – it's good to see you in one piece ... err, we were wondering if we could borrow your Invisibility Cloak – so we can shoot off to the Three Broomsticks and get a couple of cases of butterbeer – to celebrate."

"Yeah, sure," said Harry, "it's in my trunk – just be careful with it. Do you need some money?"

"Here," said Rick, pulling a handful of Galleons out of his pocket and handing them to Dean, "take this; we'll sort it out later."

"Harry?" asked Ginny, shyly. "Do you want to come down to the kitchen with me and see if you we can talk Dobby into giving us some party food?"

"Sure, good idea," said Harry, glad of the excuse to get out of the common room for a while and escape all the attention and well-meant congratulations of his housemates. Everyone was very curious about the Hover Charm, and he was finding it awkward trying to answer questions about it.

Music began blaring out, as someone turned on a wizard's wireless. Tables and chairs were quickly cleared away from the centre of the room to make a space for dancing. It was soon crowded with couples moving energetically to the music. Hermione grabbed Rick's arm and dragged him over to an empty corner of the common room.

"You are such a convincing liar, Rick," said Hermione, with a smirk. "So Harry finally got his wings, I take it?"

“Err ... yeah,” answered Rick, casting an Imperturbable Charm around them, so they couldn’t be overheard – although it was hardly necessary with all the noise. “But the rest of the story was pretty much the way it happened – about the Snitch and Harry’s broom being pulled out from under him. He sure picked the right moment to master the Animagus transformation ... it was then – or never.”

Hermione shook her head. “Harry sure was born under a lucky star – well, not for some things – but when it comes to cheating death, he sure was – I’ve lost count of the number of times he’s cheated death at Voldemort’s hand. But this time, I really thought his luck had run out – and Voldemort had finally taken him – either back into the future, or in the present time. Ginny and I have been crying our eyes out for the past hour; we were so worried and afraid. But, where has Harry been all this time? And you too, for that matter?”

“Err, well, I found Harry – or should I say, a rather magnificent Golden Eagle – with very distinctive green eyes, flying over the Forbidden Forest. Actually, it was Harry who found me – he nearly knocked me out of the air! He was in a rather exuberant mood – enjoying the experience of flying like a bird! Err ... he wanted to play ... it took me a while to convince him we needed to get back to the castle. Then, we had to tell Dumbledore that he was OK. Unfortunately, all the Heads of House were in his office; and Snape, of course, saw right through the Hover Charm story and was giving poor Harry the third degree. Fortunately, Professor McGonagall rose to his defence. You should have seen her put Snape in his place – it was a pleasure to watch – I almost felt sorry for the greasy git!”

“Gosh, I wish I’d been there,” said Hermione enviously, “I’d loved to have seen that.” Hermione sat deep in thought for a minute or two, before speaking again. “Rick, I have an idea on how we might possibly get rid of the Dementors – I’m not really sure if it will work – but I think we should consider it.”

“Really?” asked Rick in surprise. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately about how to deal with them, but so far I’ve got nowhere. I keep remembering what Voldemort said, there is no power that can destroy

Dementors. Was he wrong? Have you thought of a way to destroy them?”

“No, not to destroy them,” answered Hermione. “It’s true, Dementors cannot be killed, destroyed, or transformed into anything else ... at least not according to all the books about them in the library.”

“So what’s your idea then?” asked Rick, growing more curious.

“We take them out of time to the timeless dimension – and leave them there – forever.”

Rick sat stunned, for a moment, as doubts and questions appeared in his mind. But before he could verbalise them, Hermione did – and provided answers. She was miles ahead of him; she had obviously been thinking about this a great deal.

“As soon as you mentioned what I – well, the other Hermione, in the Nightmare Reality – said about you passing through this timeless dimension when you travel through time, I began to wonder if this might be the solution to the Dementor problem. But I couldn’t figure out how we could get them there – I mean, you can’t just hold their hands, like you did with me.” Rick shuddered at the thought.

“Voldemort helped us there again,” said Hermione smiling. “He created that black cloud – the Time Portal, which he pulled you and Harry through yesterday. We need to learn how to create one – except ours will be slightly different. His had two sides: one side in 1997 and the other in 2000. The timeless dimension must have been sandwiched between them, because, as you discovered, you pass through it when you travel through Time. Our portal will have only one side – the present time, attached to the timeless dimension. When the Dementors go through it, they won’t come out in any other time – in fact, they won’t come out at all. They’ll stay in the timeless dimension – forever.”

“But, umm, doesn’t that mean whenever anyone travels through time, they’ll have to run the gauntlet of several hundred soul-starved Dementors, just hanging about waiting for someone to enter their dimension?”

"No, not at all," replied Hermione, confidently. "This timeless dimension has neither Time, nor Space. That means, whenever someone travels through time, and passes through the timeless dimension, they can never be in the same place or in the same time as anyone else. It's impossible to encounter anyone or anything there!"

"That's brilliant, it might just work," said Rick with admiration, taking Hermione's hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze. "Oh, by the way, I already know how to create a Time Portal," added Rick.

"Really?" asked Hermione, in surprise. "How did you find out?"

"From Voldemort – he's really been working overtime at being helpful of late." said Rick with a grin. "I read his mind while he was gloating about it – I memorized the spell. But we still have a couple of problems," said Rick, hesitantly. "We need to figure out how to adapt Voldemort's Time Portal, so that it just has a single side in the present time. We'll probably need to modify the incantation."

"What incantation did Voldemort use?" asked Hermione.

It was, "Tempus iunctus nunc ad... and then what sounded like a time – probably the time in this year that he connected it to," said Rick.

"Perhaps if you put nihilum vaccus on the end instead of a time," said Hermione thoughtfully. "That means: nothing – a void."

"OK, I can try experimenting with that," said Rick. "But there's another problem: How the hell are we going to get all the Dementors to go through the Time Portal? That's going to be very tricky."

"And dangerous," added Hermione, sounding worried. "We'd need to set up the Time Portal somewhere, and when the Dementors attack, and use Patronuses to drive them through it."

"Yeah," sighed Rick. "It sounds risky, but it may be the only way. Hey, let's stop talking and thinking about Dementors. Look! The butterbeer's arrived, it's time to celebrate. How about a dance? Since

it's not a Witches' Prerogative, I guess I'm allowed to ask you today – right?"

"I noticed you waited for a nice slow number, before asking," said Hermione teasingly, as she allowed Rick to lead her towards the space that had been cleared for dancing.

"Hmm, so you noticed," said Rick contentedly as he wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist and drew her close. Hermione placed her arms around Rick's neck and rested her head dreamily on his shoulder, just enjoying being close to him.

After several dances, Ron interrupted them. "Err ... Rick, Hermione, have you got any idea what's happened to Harry and Ginny? They went to the kitchens to get food, but they've been gone an awfully long time."

Rick closed his eyes for a few moments, before replying. "I'm sure they're OK ... don't worry, mate, they'll be back soon. You know what Dobby's like when Harry's around – they're probably just having trouble getting away from him – the food will be here soon – don't worry." Ron nodded and moved on.

"I don't think it was the food that Ron was worried about," whispered Hermione, giggling, as she continued dancing with Rick. "I think he was more worried about what was really detaining Harry – and I don't mean Dobby, the house elf – I mean Ginny, the witch. I imagine you scanned your Marauders Map, to check they were OK. So where are they really?" asked Hermione with a sly grin.

"The Room of Requirement," answered Rick, laughing.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Hermione, "It seems like Ginny has finally got her way with Harry. I wonder why he changed his mind, though. I mean, it's been obvious for ages, that he likes Ginny, but he always keeps her at a distance. I'm sure it's because he's afraid she'd be targeted by Voldemort, if the two of them got too close. I wonder what changed."

"Maybe it was the discussion we had in Dumbledore's office yesterday," suggested Rick. "Harry's been wearing that Prophecy like a millstone around his neck, all year. It's really been oppressing him. But that mark Voldemort put on his forehead tends to destroy the Prophecy's credibility. I mean, the Prophecy says that Harry can't live while Voldemort's alive, and that he's the one that has to kill him. But now he knows that he can't live if he kills Voldemort – so the Prophecy can't be right. That's what you and Dumbledore were saying yesterday, isn't it? – maybe you got through to him."

"Yes, maybe," said Hermione. A faster number blared out on the wizard's wireless and she took Rick's hand and led him back to the corner where they had been sitting before. "You know, Rick," said Hermione, as they sat down together, "it might also be that Harry's feeling more confident, especially now that he's mastered the Animagus transformation."

"Yeah, I don't think I've ever seen Harry looking as happy as he did after we'd been flying together. He was in raptures. Mind you, I don't think we should discount Ginny's charms. She's had her heart set on Harry for so long now, and as time goes by, she's becoming more and more bold, and determined. Still, it could just be another case of Quidditch victory – and evading Voldemort – euphoria; and tomorrow it will be business as usual and Harry pushing Ginny away."

"I hope not," said Hermione earnestly. "She really loves him, you know. Ginny was heartbroken today when it seemed that Voldemort had finally got him. Harry has so much of the weight of the world on his shoulders, it would really do him good to be able to share it with Ginny and open up his heart to her. He's so alone...."

"Yeah, I couldn't agree more," said Rick. "There is nothing quite as wonderful as love," he said, smiling fondly at Hermione. Just at that moment, the portrait hole swung open and Ginny and Harry staggered in, laden with baskets of food from the house elves. "Hey, look, here they are now – and boy, is Ginny blushing. She's going to have to learn not to do that, if she wants to keep what's going on between her and Harry a secret."

“That’s for sure,” laughed Hermione. “You can see how happy they both are. Rick, I don’t think we should let on to anyone that we know something’s going on between them – that includes Ron – and Harry!”

“Harry?” asked Rick, puzzled. “But he already knows – obviously.”

“Yes, but if this isn’t just Quidditch euphoria – and I hope it’s more than that – then he’ll want to keep it secret – for Ginny’s sake, for her safety. I want to encourage them, Rick – this will be good for them both. And the best way to encourage them is to pretend not to notice. It’s obvious, isn’t it?” asked Hermione.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 28 - Birds of a Feather

Professor Dumbledore sent a message to Hermione, Harry, and Rick requesting that they come to his office after dinner, a few days after the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match.

The Headmaster congratulated Harry on his success with the Animagus transformation, and in particular, his brilliant timing in pulling it off just when he needed it most. But he cautioned Harry not to fly alone for the time being, and suggested that Rick accompany him whenever he 'took to the wing'. Dumbledore was well aware that it would be pointless forbidding Harry to fly altogether. He was clearly enraptured with it, and nothing would hold him back.

Hermione presented her idea for dealing with the Dementors; by 'parking' them permanently in the Timeless Dimension.

Dumbledore sat enthralled, sucking on a lemon drop, as he listened to Hermione. When she finished speaking, he was silent for a minute or two as he stroked his beard, looking off into space with unfocussed eyes. Hermione sat nervously awaiting the headmaster's opinion. Finally he spoke. "Brilliant, Miss Granger, simply brilliant. It is fascinating, is it not, that the source of your ingenious idea is your own counterpart in the Nightmare Reality, visited by Mr. Godfrey?"

"Yes, Professor," agreed Hermione. "It would never have occurred to me that Rick was transiting a Timeless Dimension, or indeed, that such a thing could even exist. But then the other Hermione did have the advantage of studying Physics at university, and obviously she'd read heaps on Quantum Mechanics and the like."

Rick had to suppress a laugh. Hermione was attempting to explain why the other Hermione had thought of something which she, herself, had missed. It was almost as if she was in competition with herself. She had found another competitor, besides Rick, who had an unfair advantage over her. Rick could tell from the twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes, that he, too, was entertaining the same amusing thought.

“Hermione,” said Rick, smiling at her. “When I was talking to you – I mean her – the other Hermione, in the Nightmare Reality, she was explaining how I was always supposed to have gone back twice to that Halloween Night. When I told her I could have done without the month between, in the Nightmare Reality, she said: But you never know, something might happen – or you might learn something – in this terrible reality which will be very useful to you when you get back to your own reality.”

“How right she was,” observed Dumbledore, nodding his head and marvelling at the complexity and seeming Intelligence of the universe. They all sat silently for a few moments, attempting to wrap their minds around the idea that events which occurred in the now, non-existent, Nightmare Reality, could profoundly affect events in this one.

“I believe your adaptation of Voldemort’s spell to create a Time Portal that leads to the Timeless Dimension, rather than the past or future, should work, Miss Granger. The problem is going to be getting the Dementors to pass through the portal. Patronuses can be effective in repulsing the vile creatures. However, from my experience, they would have great difficulty herding them in a particular direction – particularly if there were hundreds of them attacking together. We need to give further consideration to the matter.”

Harry and Rick spent many happy hours during the following weekends flying together. Harry’s appetite for it was insatiable. With the approach of spring, the days were becoming slowly longer. Despite this, it was still getting dark soon after the end of classes, so they were forced to confine their flying to the weekends. They would take the secret passages up to the West Tower and transform into their respective Animagus forms, before flying off for hours of sheer joy. With the imminent attack on Hogwarts coming inexorably closer, these shared outings provided a welcome respite from the growing tension they were feeling.

The flying expeditions also strengthened the bond between them. In their Animagus forms they quickly forged a means of communicating, through movement and gesture, and also language. The range of

noises they could each make was far more subtle and nuanced to their avian ears than it would seem to a human listener.

The freedom they experienced was indescribable. Sometimes they flew over the Forbidden Forest, other times they would fly over farmlands, lakes, and mountains. In the afternoons they could usually find a strong updraft over the mountains to lift them high, thousands of feet above the earth.

One Sunday afternoon, late in March, found them riding a thermal high above an unknown mountain in the Scottish Highlands. They were circling together, rising higher and higher. The mountain-top and the upper slopes were still white with snow, but it quickly gave way to vast expanses of green forests and then fields which cloaked the earth far beneath in a patchwork quilt of browns, yellows and greens.

Suddenly, without warning, the eagle began tumbling downwards. Sometimes, when one of them spotted prey, far below, they would dive for it, although they never attempted making a kill. It was just a game. However, they were far too high at the moment to spot anything so far below. If Harry was diving for the sheer joy of it, as they sometimes did, or to quench his thirst at a stream, he would have first communicated his intention. Rick knew instinctively that something was wrong.

In a controlled dive, Harry was like a broad arrow, with wings held close to the body and beak pointed downwards. He was poetry in motion. But now, he was tumbling ungraciously earthwards.

What can I do? he asked himself anxiously, as he followed Harry down. I could change into a dragon and try to catch him with my claws. No! That won't work! I don't have the speed and manoeuvrability as a dragon; he'd get away from me. Rick noticed that Harry had managed to pull his wings in, and was now pretty much in a classic dive, although it wasn't as graceful as usual. A Peregrine Falcon can dive faster than a Golden Eagle, so Rick decided to get back to earth as quickly as possible and transform. He should be able to catch Harry the way he did in the Quidditch match against Slytherin ... he hoped.

After transforming, Rick looked up and spotted the eagle, still plummeting downwards. He was about to cast a charm to catch it, when it slowly spread its wings, pulling out of its dive. It managed an untidy, but satisfactory, landing before transforming. Harry was lying on the ground grasping his forehead and screaming with pain. Instantly, Rick understood what had happened. Voldemort or his minions were attacking somewhere. Even as an eagle Animagus, Harry's connection to Voldemort caused him pain.

"Where?" asked Rick, kneeling down beside his friend.

"Diagon Alley ... at least a hundred ... using Cruciatus ..." blurted Harry, finding it difficult to speak coherently through the pain.

"I'll go and sort them out," said Rick. "You stay here —"

"No, Rick, I'm coming with you...." said Harry resolutely, taking deep breaths to steady himself. "This is a huge attack, you might need some help."

Harry had, of late, become increasingly powerful. He certainly could look after himself. It's time to stop keeping him wrapped up in cotton wool, thought Rick. The Death Eaters would probably have spread out by now, up the side alleys and in the shops. It would be hard to find them all. But, Harry would draw them out like a magnet. "I'm going to make myself invisible before we Apparate," said Rick. "I'm going in as the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. But you'll be visible. I'll cast a Reflecting Shield around you, so you can save your energy for offence. Once the Death Eaters know that you're in Diagon Alley, they'll come to you like bees to honey – and I'll be able to Squib the lot of them. But if things don't go our way, and you're in danger, we Apparate straight out of there. Agreed?"

"Yeah, OK," agreed Harry, rising shakily to his feet. He took out his wand, and, with a look of utmost determination, held out his hand to Rick. "Let's go," he said.

Rick and Harry Apparated into Diagon Alley, just in front of Madam Malkin's. The scene that greeted their eyes was horrific. Witches, wizards, and even children, were lying stunned all over the narrow alley. The last few to resist the swarm of black-robed, masked Death Eaters, were being easily overpowered. Harry noticed several Death Eaters using the Cruciatus Curse. They were laughing malevolently as their victims writhed in agony.

"Stupefy! Stupefy!" cried Harry stunning one, then another of the Death Eaters who were using the Cruciatus Curse. It didn't take long for them to notice him. Soon, he was surrounded by an ugly mob of Death Eaters. He was pleased to note that, in turning their attention to him, they had stopped torturing their victims. At least a dozen Death Eaters immediately attempted to hex Harry, but were struck down by their own curses, courtesy of Rick's Reflecting Shield. Several had used the Killing Curse. They now lay dead on the ground, their eyes frozen open in terror.

"Death Eaters, stop cursing Potter!" cried out the magically amplified voice of Peter Pettigrew. "He's protected by a Reflecting Shield; your curses are rebounding on you!" It appeared that Pettigrew was in charge of this attack. He increased the intensity of his Sonorous Charm and ordered all the Death Eaters to return from wherever they were to the centre of Diagon Alley. "Surround Potter, and start hitting him with non-lethal curses. Try to protect yourselves with a shield if you can. He won't be able to hold that Reflecting Shield for much longer; we'll soon wear him down."

Pettigrew ended the Sonorous Charm and stepped closer to Harry, regarding him hungrily. "Well, well, Harry, it looks like today is going to be my lucky day. After I stun you and deliver you to my Master, his gratitude to me will be boundless. I will be his undisputed favourite, the envy of my fellow Death Eaters," he said with a greedy grin.

"He must be running low on Death Eaters if he has to resort to vermin like you to lead an attack," spat Harry defiantly. "The Ghost of Godric Gryffindor must have wiped out every competent Death Eater, if all he could scrape from the bottom of the barrel was a scummy little rat like you. Stupefy!" yelled Harry pointing his wand at Pettigrew.

Pettigrew glared at Harry. His prosthetic silver hand, momentarily glowed, leaving a silvery curtain around him. Harry's curse was harmlessly deflected away. "I have more power than you imagine, Potter," he sneered. "You're just like your father, and Black, and the rest of them. They always underestimated me! I used to spy on them at school in my Animagus form. Do you know what they used to say behind my back? 'Poor, weak little Peter'. Well they were wrong! The law of the jungle is survival of the fittest – and I've survived them all."

"You betrayed them all, you filthy little coward!" screamed Harry, enraged. "You're the reason they're dead! You betrayed your friends to save your own miserable skin! You think you've gotten away with your treachery, don't you? Well, you're wrong! I'll settle the debt for my parents ... and Sirius."

"You?" laughed Pettigrew. "You had the chance to get rid of me three years ago in the Shrieking Shack – but you didn't have the guts – you couldn't do it. You're just like your parents and Black – too soft to survive in this hard cruel world. They all thought I was the weak one – but surprise, surprise, I was the only one who turned out to be tough enough to make it," gloated Pettigrew.

"No, Harry," he sneered triumphantly, "you won't survive either – nor will you be settling any debts – because your luck just ran out on you. Oh, and in case you're expecting the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor to come to your rescue, you can forget it. My Master knows there's no Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. He realised some time ago that it was really Dumbledore, making himself invisible and pretending to be the ghost. Unfortunately for you, Dumbledore's attending a meeting at the Ministry of Magic this afternoon. Even more unfortunately, before we attacked Diagon Alley, a group of Death Eaters surrounded the Ministry. They are currently warding it, so that no one can leave. Dumbledore's trapped inside. He can't Apparate, floo, or even Portkey out. Clever, isn't it?" said Pettigrew smirking at Harry.

"Squibbus!" the ethereal voice of the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor boomed out. "No, Pettigrew, not so clever at all.... Your evil, demented master got it wrong again, it seems. Dumbledore may indeed be at the Ministry of Magic, but the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor is certainly here, in Diagon Alley ... and, at your service. Oh yes ...

and I just Squibbed you along with the other ... now let me see ... it must be one hundred and twenty-seven Death Eaters. Does that sound right to you? There were thirty-five in various shops and alleyways whom I Squibbed while you were exchanging pleasantries with Harry. And there are ninety-three here, including yourself, whom I've just blessed with my favourite curse. I hope I've accounted for them all – I'd really hate to miss anyone."

As the ghost was speaking, Pettigrew and his fellow Death Eaters were attempting to Apparate away, but to no avail. Then they frantically tried various spells, none of which worked, of course. It became painfully clear to them that they had, indeed, been transformed into detestable Squibs. They stood stunned, looking stupidly at each other, wondering what to do.

Suddenly, Pettigrew began to wail. "D-Dementors! Help, p-please! P-Please protect us from the D-Dementors, they'll s-suck out our s-souls. H-Help, help...." he wailed woefully.

"Dementors? What are you talking about, Pettigrew?" demanded the ghost.

"D-Dementors are coming," howled Pettigrew, shaking with fear, his mousy little eyes darting hither and thither. "After we had s-stunned everyone, the D-Dementors were going to come and s-suck out their s-souls. Our M-Master w-wanted to reward them for their l-loyalty. W-We were s-supposed to Apparate away first ... but now we can't! They'll s-suck out our s-souls as well," cried Pettigrew fearfully.

The sky grew suddenly darker and a bitter chill engulfed them. Around fifty Dementors descended upon the alley. They immediately started for the Squibbed Death Eaters. Harry was surprised when they didn't go for the unfortunate people lying stunned on the ground. They would have been easier prey. But what Dementors crave are feelings and emotions. Those who were still conscious – the Squibs – were reeking of fear, and immediately attracted the despicable Dementors. The stunned ones would keep for later. The Dementors lowered their hoods, eager to begin their feeding frenzy.

“Expecto Patronum,” yelled Harry, focussing on the joyful feeling of flying as an Animagus eagle. His stag Patronus burst from his wand, and, lowering its antlers, began charging the Dementors.

Harry spun around as he heard the words Expecto Patronum repeated from behind him. Harry was stunned at the menagerie of Patronuses that erupted from Rick’s invisible wand. The Dementors fled before them.

“Wow,” said Harry in awe. “And I thought my Patronus was impressive....”

“I think most of the Dementors have gone,” whispered Rick. “But, I saw about half a dozen fleeing up Knockturn Alley. There’s no one up there for them to kiss, so I want to leave them there for now, and try a little experiment. I’m going to try to create a single-sided Time Portal across the entrance to Knockturn Alley. Then I’ll Apparate in, behind the Dementors, and cast some Patronuses to drive them down Knockturn Alley towards Diagon Alley and through the portal.”

“OK,” replied Harry softly, speaking out of the side of his mouth – he didn’t want people to notice him talking to himself – If Rita Skeeter got wind of it, she’d have a field day. He could already see the headlines: ‘Harry Potter – The Boy Who Lost It’. “I’ll check out the people stunned by the Death Eaters and make sure they’re alright,” said Harry softly.

Rick concentrated hard on creating the Time Portal. “Tempus iunctus nunc ad nihilum vaccus,” he intoned, waving his wand at the junction where Knockturn Alley joined onto Diagon Alley. A shimmering fabric came from his wand. It was transparent, with a faint blue tinge. Initially, it was only about a metre square, but Rick found it could easily be stretched to the required size and shape. He had just attached the last corner when the terrible waves of coldness, fear, and misery hit him.

Rick had been facing up Knockturn Alley, keeping an eye out for the Dementors, in case they came before he was ready for them. But what he didn’t know was that there were another five Dementors, still in Diagon Alley. They had been driven up the Leaky Cauldron end,

and had been hidden around the corner. The fact that Rick was invisible was immaterial to the Dementors. It was feelings and emotions that guided them to their prey. It was fortunate for those lying stunned in the alley, that Rick's emotional energy was much greater than theirs, in their unconscious state. The Dementors bypassed them, and glided straight towards Rick, coming up behind him.

As Rick struggled to keep his feet, the stench of rotting flesh assailed him. The hideous rattling behind him grew louder and louder. The cold was unbearable, Rick tried to turn to face the horrible creatures, but he stumbled and fell to the ground. He saw the evil Dementors looming above him, throwing back their hoods, eager to begin their obscene feast. Rick knew his only hope now was to transform – but he didn't have enough energy left, even for that.

"Expecto Patronum," he heard Harry bellowing, from what seemed a long way away. But it didn't take long for Harry's stag Patronus to reach him. It charged at the Dementors and they fled up Knockturn Alley. Rick began to feel better as the terrible cold and misery left him. He managed to struggle to his feet. Harry was running towards him. "Rick?" said Harry softly, gasping to catch his breath. "Are you here? Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm OK, now," replied Rick. "There must have been more Dementors down the end of Diagon Alley, they came up behind me and caught me unawares. They completely overpowered me. If it hadn't been for your Patronus, they'd have had my soul. Thanks mate, you just save my life."

"Glad to return the favour," said Harry. "But I think I've got a long way to go to catch up with you."

"Don't worry about it, mate," replied Rick. "Now that's interesting. When your Patronus attacked those Dementors, they went right through the Time Portal – but the wrong way. Nothing happened to them at all, it's as if it wasn't there. They just kept on going up Knockturn Alley, towards the other Dementors."

"Umm, what did you expect to happen?" asked Harry.

"I don't know," replied Rick. "I'll have to ask Hermione about it. I'm sure she'll be able to explain it. Now, let me just check that there are no other Dementors around here, apart from those ones up Knockturn Alley – I don't want any more surprises like that!" Rick closed his eyes for a moment, projecting a map, before he spoke again. "Yep, that's it, there are just the eleven of them. They're out the front of Borgin and Burkes. I'm going to Apparate to the other side of them and let some Patronuses loose on them. Maybe you should position yourself a bit further away from here – maybe outside Gambol and Japes – just in case the Time Portal doesn't work. That will give you plenty of time to hit them with a Patronus."

"OK. But, be careful, mate," said Harry, before heading off up Diagon Alley.

Rick's plan worked perfectly. He Apparated behind the Dementors and cast his Patronuses before they had a chance to detect him. Rick directed some of the Patronuses to stay above the Dementors, to prevent them escaping upwards into the air. He followed close behind as the Dementors fled down Knockturn Alley and right through his Time Portal – where they completely disappeared. Rick decided to follow them through, to see if Hermione was right. As usual, she was, of course. It was exactly like when he twisted his wand to travel through time. He was in the Timeless Dimension – and he was there completely alone. There were no Dementors. There was just his mind, and nothing else.

Rick returned to the present time and destroyed the Time Portal – he didn't want anyone walking through it. He found Harry outside Gambol and Japes and told him what happened.

"That's great, Rick," said Harry. "I was looking at the end of Knockturn Alley the whole time, and no Dementors came out, you must have done it. Hermione's going to be really happy when she hears.... But we have other problems. While you were constructing the portal, I was Ennervating some of the stunned people. The ones I revived began helping out. I told them all to Apparated away – just in case any more Dementors show up. But there are some people that couldn't be revived. Maybe you ought to take a look at them, Rick."

Rick and Harry found two wizards, three witches, and four young children who couldn't be revived. "It's the Cruciatus Curse," said Rick. "They look just the same as Hermione's parents did after they were attacked by Death Eaters, that night. Thank goodness they haven't been kissed by Dementors," he said, sounding relieved.

"You mean you can do something for them?" asked Harry hopefully.

"No," said Rick, shaking his head. "I can't. I don't know how to reverse this – but Hermione does. She's developed amazing healing powers —"

"So, that's why her parents didn't end up like Neville's," said Harry. "Hermione healed them, didn't she?"

"Yeah, that's right," replied Rick. "We need to get these people back to Hogwarts, so Hermione can work her healing magic on them. Can you get them all laid out side by side, with their hands touching? I'm going to pay a quick visit to the Ministry of Magic. I'll Squib the Death Eaters who are maintaining the wards there and trapping everyone inside. It shouldn't take too long."

Rick was only gone a few minutes. Harry gave a start when Rick's voice suddenly began whispering, "that's twelve more Squibs to add to today's tally. I Apparated inside the Ministry of Magic, and had a quick word with Dumbledore. He said not to take these people to the hospital wing. He doesn't want word to get out that Hermione is able to heal people in this condition. If the Death Eaters find out, they'll realise that she's healed her parents and go after them again. Also, if they know people can recover from the prolonged use of the Cruciatus Curse, they'll start killing them outright with the Killing Curse."

"Yeah, makes sense," replied Harry. "And Voldemort would try even harder to kill Hermione. So what are we going to do with them?"

"Dumbledore's already Apparated to the Shrieking Shack. He said he'll have the lounge looking like a hospital ward in no time. So we're going to Apparate them straight there," said Rick, taking hold of

Harry's hand. Harry was already holding on to the hand of one of their patients.

Rick left Harry to help Professor Dumbledore get the patients into the waiting beds at the Shrieking Shack. He made himself invisible, and Apparated to the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room. Projecting his magical map, he was happy to find Hermione inside. After checking he was alone, he made himself visible and entered. Hermione was packing away her books and about to head down for dinner.

"Rick! Where have you been all afternoon? And where's Harry? Was he with you?" she asked in a rush.

"You've got to come with me immediately, Hermione. I'll answer all your questions later, OK?" whispered Rick, in her ear.

"Rick, is Harry alright?" she asked imploringly.

"Harry's fine, now come on, we've got to go."

"But —"

"Later," said Rick, pulling Hermione to her feet and giving her a quick kiss. He knew how much she hated not knowing what was going on, but there wasn't time now. He took her hand and led her out of the common room and down to the Entrance Hall.

"Rick!" she snapped impatiently, "What is going on? And where are you taking me?"

"We're going to the Shrieking Shack," replied Rick, once they were out of the castle and heading across the grounds towards the Whomping Willow. "There was a Death Eater attack in Diagon Alley this afternoon. Nine people including four little children were held under the Cruciatus Curse for too long. Harry and Dumbledore are with them now, in the Shrieking Shack. They look just like your parents did – do you think you can heal them?"

“Umm ... I should be able to ... I think. I wouldn’t be able to establish an Empathetic Magic link the way I could with my parents, but I shouldn’t need to; now that I know what the problem is – and how to fix it. But why weren’t they brought to the hospital wing — Oh, I suppose Dumbledore doesn’t want Madam Pomfrey or anyone else to know that I can heal people who have been held under the Cruciatus Curse like that. It would endanger my parents, and Death Eaters would start killing people instead.”

“That’s what I love about you Hermione,” said Rick affectionately, as he stopped the Whomping Willow from threshing about by flicking his finger towards the knot at its base. “I never have to explain things to you, because you figure them out before I get the chance. Have I told you lately that you are one very smart witch?” said Rick, putting an arm around Hermione and kissing her.

“How ... very ... touching,” came a snide voice from right behind them, as they were about to enter the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow. They spun around to find themselves face-to-face with Professor Snape. And it was a very smug and self-satisfied face.

“I always find Sunday evenings such a profitable time to patrol the Hogwarts grounds,” he said in a casual tone, his lips curled in a malevolent smile. “It always seems to encourage an abnormal amount of inappropriate behaviour —”

“But Professor,” protested Hermione. “We weren’t doing anything inappropriate – we weren’t even snogging. And it’s well before curfew. We are perfectly entitled to be outside at this time of day.”

“But you are not entitled to leave the Hogwarts grounds. I do not know how you disabled the Whomping Willow,” he said, glaring suspiciously at Rick. “But it is obvious that you were about to enter the tunnel, which you have known about since your third year, Miss Granger. It doesn’t require a great deal of imagination to guess that you were on your way to the Shrieking Shack for a lovers’ tryst – Do you deny it, Miss Granger?”

“Yes, I do deny it!” yelled Hermione, glaring defiantly at Snape.

“Don’t raise your voice to me – and don’t lie to me either,” said Snape in a slow, menacing voice. “Your lie will cost Gryffindor an additional twenty points ... on top of the fifty points I am deducting for each of you, for attempting to leave the Hogwarts grounds without permission.”

“But we do have permission, sir,” said Rick.

“Oh really, Mr Godfry?” said Snape sarcastically. “Kindly produce your note then ... if you have one.”

“I don’t have a note, sir, but Professor Dumbledore asked me to bring Hermione to the Shrieking Shack. He’s waiting for her now. And it’s urgent. I don’t think he’ll be very happy to hear that you prevented us from following his instructions.”

“What utter tripe!” snarled Snape. “I’ve had more than enough of your impertinence, Godfry. You are both to return to the castle immediately. In addition to the one hundred and twenty house points I have deducted from Gryffindor – you just lost another twenty for your insolence – you will both be serving a four-hour detention in my dungeon – starting now! I am sure I can find some suitably unsavoury tasks to occupy you both.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but we have to obey the Headmaster’s orders,” said Rick determinedly. “I’m sure he will be happy to verify that I am telling the truth, if you ask him.”

“Alright, Godfry,” said Snape, calling Ricks bluff. “After you,” he said, gesturing to the entrance of the tunnel, his lips twisting into an ugly smirk.

“Err ... I wasn’t meaning that you should ask him, now,” stammered Rick. “I meant —”

“I don’t care what you were meaning Black – err, Godfry. Right now will be perfect. Unless, of course, you think Professor Dumbledore is no longer at the Shrieking Shack?” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

It was clear to Rick, from Snape's slip of the tongue, in calling him Black, that he was reliving his old enmity with Sirius Black. This was, in fact, the very spot where Snape had almost died, as a result of the trick Sirius had played upon him. Snape was, once again, projecting his hatred of Sirius onto him.

"Err ... I don't think Professor Dumbledore wants you to come to the Shrieking Shack right now, sir," said Rick nervously.

"And why not, Mr. Godfrey?" snarled Snape, furiously.

Rick realised that there was no way he could convince Snape to let him and Hermione go on alone. "Hermione," said Rick quickly, "duck into the tunnel and get going, I think I can sort this out by myself."

But before she could move, Snape whipped out his wand. "Don't either of you move, or I'll —"

"Expelliarmus!" said Rick, without drawing his wand, or even moving. Snape flew several feet through the air, landing unceremoniously on his backside. He looked up at Rick with an expression of stunned fury on his face.

"Go, Hermione, now!" shouted Rick. "Get in the tunnel and out of sight!"

Hermione didn't need to be told a second time, she already knew what Rick had in mind. She dived into the tunnel entrance.

While Snape was struggling angrily to his feet, Rick positioned himself in the mouth of the tunnel. "Here's your wand sir," he said throwing it back to Snape. But just as Snape wrapped his fingers around it, Rick made himself invisible and said, "Obliviate". He reached out an invisible hand and pressed the knot to re-activate the Whomping Willow.

Snape's expression of anger changed to one of bewilderment, as he stood disoriented, clutching his wand. Unfortunately, he was standing a little too close to the Whomping Willow. Before he had time to

realise this, consider the likely consequences and take evasive action, he received a massive whack from one of the tree's wild branches, which sent him sailing through the air, to land in a heap some distance away.

"Rick, you're terrible," whispered Hermione, as Snape struggled to his feet and began limping groggily back towards the castle. "I hope he's not badly hurt."

"Yeah, me too," said Rick. "I honestly didn't intend to get him beaten up by the Whomping Willow. It didn't occur to me. I had to reactivate it before he recovered from the Memory Charm."

"Honestly, Rick," said Hermione, as she followed him along the tunnel, "you really have to stop memory-charming Snape like that. If he ever discovers what you've done, there'll be hell to pay."

"Yeah, I know," sighed Rick. "But he's so damn suspicious – and he's such a difficult git! It's really the only way to deal with him sometimes. Did you notice him calling me Black back there? He did it at the Yule Ball too. I took a peek at what he was thinking at the time —"

"Rick!" scolded Hermione. Then after a moment, her curiosity got the better of her. "Well, go on," she said. "What was he thinking?"

"For some reason, I remind him of Sirius Black. Snape hated Sirius, and James Potter, when he was at school with them. It was partly because of the tricks they played on him, but mainly because he was jealous of them. The witches used to swoon over the pair of them, but they never wanted to have anything to do with Snape. It got him really twisted up inside, and probably contributed to his becoming a Death Eater. And now he's reliving his hatred of Sirius Black through me...." said Rick sighing.

"Hmm, yes, I can see it now," said Hermione. "The witches certainly do swoon over you, my Prince Charming," she said smiling fondly at Rick. "And, of course, the entrance to this tunnel is where Snape was almost torn apart by a savage werewolf, because of Sirius Black. I guess it must bring back very unpleasant memories for him."

“Yeah ... and makes him very unpleasant to me,” said Rick. “Well, here we are ... after you,” he said, as they reached the end of the tunnel.

Hermione climbed out of the hole in the floor and looked around in surprise. The last time she had been in this room – three years ago – it had been disorderly and dusty, with paper peeling off the walls and stains all over the floor. The furniture had all been smashed. But the sight that met her eyes today was very different. In fact, it looked suspiciously like one of the wards in the Hogwarts hospital wing. There were nine beds arranged in neat rows, and everything was clean and tidy. The room had obviously been magically enlarged. The only clue that they were in the Shrieking Shack was the windows, which remained boarded up.

“Ah, Miss Granger, very nice to see you,” said the Headmaster warmly. “I believe we have found an urgent use for your newly-acquired Healing talents,” he said, gesturing towards the unconscious patients.

As Rick came out of the hole in the floor, Harry grinned at him. “What took you so long, Rick? You said you’d be back here with Hermione in ten minutes ... did you get ... distracted along the way?”

Rick blushed as he noticed Professor Dumbledore raise his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth turn up, as he tried to hide a smile, which was betrayed by the amused twinkling of his eyes. They must both think we’ve been off snogging again – just like that time at Hogsmeade station, thought Rick, as he noticed Hermione blushing as well.

“Err ... yeah,” answered Rick. “Well, not so much distracted as detained – by Snape ... err, Professor Snape, I mean. He caught us just as we were about to enter the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow. He thought we were sneaking off for a ... err ... some ‘inappropriate behaviour’ were the words he used, I think.”

“How very awkward,” said Dumbledore, looking most amused. “I shall have to have a little chat with Professor Snape, and request him not to deduct house points from Gryffindor or have you serving

detentions. I'm sure I'll be able to straighten out any misunderstanding."

"No ... err ... please don't," said Rick quickly. "I – I mean, there's no need for you to talk with Professor Snape ... err, about it, I mean. We, err ... we ... sorted it out already. I don't think he'll be deducting house points or anything like that, sir."

"I hope you didn't divulge your true purpose in leaving the school grounds to him," said Dumbledore, feigning concern.

"No, sir," replied Rick nervously. "He has no idea what we were really up to."

"It is most fortunate that he allowed you to proceed and leave the school grounds, under the circumstances. You must be very persuasive, Mr. Godfry," added the Headmaster with an inscrutable smile. "But now, I believe we have serious work to do. Miss Granger, may I suggest that you start with the youngest ones."

Hermione seated herself beside a little boy, who looked to be no more than three years old. A tear ran down her cheek as she looked at the small unconscious body. "What kind of monsters could do this to such a young child?" she asked in a shaking voice.

"Sadly, Miss Granger, this is the nature of evil," said Dumbledore, his face darkening. "It has no heart, no compassion, nor any feeling for the suffering of others. On the contrary, Voldemort and his followers view such emotions as a manifestation of weakness. This is what we are fighting against. Make no mistake about it, if Voldemort should win, our world would very soon be transformed into a nightmare world, just like the one Mr. Godfry witnessed, firsthand. The stakes in the battle between Good and Evil are enormous," he said, in a calm, but sober voice.

Rick stood next to Hermione, and placed an arm around her shoulder, giving her a comforting hug.

"Right," she said, determinedly, "let's get on with it." She placed her hands on either side of the little boy's head and concentrated hard.

After several minutes the little boy's eyes suddenly opened – they were wide with fear. “Obliviate,” said Rick quickly, before stunning him.

“What did you just do to him Rick?” asked Harry curiously, as Hermione moved on to the next child.

“Hermione discovered that what causes people to go into a coma like this is fear,” explained Rick. “It's not actually the pain of the Cruciatus Curse, but the fear it creates – fear that the pain will never end. The mind tries to protect itself from the fear, by switching itself off – it hibernates. Hermione has learned how to force the mind out of its hibernation, before the brain cells begin to die off.”

“Yeah, but why did you memory-charm and stun the little boy?” asked Harry.

“We figured that when they regain consciousness, they'll immediately remember the terrible pain of the Cruciatus Curse – it will seem like it was happening just moments ago. They'll be so full of fear and terror that their minds might hibernate again. Even if they don't, they'll be traumatised. Take a look at their eyes when they first wake up. I Obliviate them immediately, to make them forget about being under the Cruciatus Curse. I'm just stunning them so they don't see what we're doing. They're probably related, and it would be very upsetting to see their parents or other members of their family in a coma. When we've done them all, we'll Ennervate them together.”

Rick had been watching the little girl Hermione was working on while he was talking to Harry. Her eyes had just opened, in terror. Rick quickly memory-charmed and stunned her. Hermione had already turned her attention to the third child. It took about half-an-hour for her to heal all nine.

“Please do not Ennervate them just yet,” said Professor Dumbledore. “I think it would be best if the three of you were to return to school first. I do not wish anyone to connect their recovery with Miss Granger – or any of you, for that matter. I will Ennervate them, and explain that they were injured in the Death Eater attack at Diagon Alley, and brought here to Hogsmeade to receive medical attention. I will not, of

course, mention the nature of the curse they suffered. As a result of Mr. Godfry's excellent Memory Charms, they will not recall it, either. I will accompany them to the Three Broomsticks, from where they will be able to floo to their homes."

"You have a great gift, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore, looking at Hermione with admiration. "When this war is finally over, and it is no longer necessary to be so secretive, you will, I believe, be honoured as one of the greatest Healers in magical history. But for now, you will have to be content with my deepest gratitude."

"Thank you, Professor," said Hermione bashfully. For once in her life, she was at a loss for words.

"And thank you, Mr. Godfry, for your assistance," he said, turning to Rick. "Memory Charms are notoriously difficult to get right. They can be highly dangerous, if not applied correctly. You are, indeed, a master of the art. I do hope, however, that you will always be judicious in their use, and only employ them in appropriate situations," he added, his blue eyes twinkling mischievously.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 29 - The Great Cover-Up

When Harry entered the Great Hall for breakfast on Monday morning, he immediately noticed it was much noisier than usual. He was a bit late, and the hall was already packed with students. He hadn't gotten very far into the hall before he was spotted. The noise-level increased dramatically, and almost every head turned towards him. Hundreds of pairs of eyes followed him, as he made his way self-consciously to the Gryffindor table. He sat down gratefully next to Ron, who had saved him a place.

Ron grinned at Harry, oddly, his head slightly cocked to one side, as he pushed a copy of the Daily Prophet towards him. Quickly swallowing a mouthful of sausage, he clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Hey, mate, why didn't you tell me about your run-in with those Death Eaters and the Dementors in Diagon Alley yesterday? Blimey, if I want to know what you're up to these days, I have to read about it in the Daily Prophet ... you might want take a look. If even half of what it says here is true, you were bloody brilliant!"

Although he was trying to hide it behind his rough manner, Harry could tell that Ron was hurt. He had been left out of things a lot, lately. "I'm sorry, mate, but by the time I got back last night, it was late, and I was exhausted ... I went straight to bed. It was a real struggle dragging myself out of bed this morning," said Harry, piling a couple of pieces of toast, some sausages, and bacon onto his plate before looking at the paper. The headline was huge:

Death Eater Attack on Diagon Alley Routed by Harry Potter and Mystery Ghost

Most of the article was wildly inaccurate. Hardly surprising, thought Harry, considering who wrote it: Rita Skeeter. She had clearly changed her tack from last year, when she had questioned his sanity at every opportunity. Now she couldn't pile the superlatives high enough as she placed him on a hero's pedestal. Harry sighed, thinking, I think I liked it better when she was calling me a loony. Halfway down the page was an old picture of Harry taken at the wand-weighting ceremony for the Triwizard Tournament in his fourth year. The caption beneath it was vintage Rita:

The Boy Who Lived Teams Up with The Ghost who Squibbed

Harry groaned and pushed the paper away in disgust.

“So, were you really in Diagon Alley yesterday?” asked Ron. “And did you really see off a hundred Dementors single-handedly?”

“Come on, Ron, you know better by now than to believe anything written by Rita bloody Skeeter,” said Harry, looking around and noticing everyone within earshot hanging on his words. “I’ll tell you about it later – somewhere a bit more private. OK, mate?” he said softly in Ron’s ear.

After dinner that night, Harry, Hermione, and Rick were sitting together in a corner of the Gryffindor common room. Of late, their conversations seemed to revolve around a single topic: Dementors – and how to get rid of them. Rick’s success in disposing of eleven Dementors in Diagon Alley the previous day was very encouraging. If they could just get the Dementors to go through a Time Portal, they would be rid of them. But try as they might, they were still no closer to coming up with a strategy for funnelling hundreds of the evil creatures through a portal

Harry noticed Ron approaching them, and then turn away when he saw them deep in conversation. Harry felt a pang of guilt, at the way Ron was becoming estranged from him, Hermione, and Rick. It wasn’t anything deliberate. Mainly, it was because Dumbledore always insisted on keeping everything secret. Harry understood the Headmaster’s reasoning, but he hated the way it was affecting his friendship with Ron, who, he feared, was beginning to take it personally. “We’re really stumped on this one,” said Harry. “What do you two think about letting Ron in on what we’re trying to do – maybe he’ll have some ideas.”

Hermione and Rick both understood Harry’s feelings about Ron. They felt the same way. “That’s a really good idea,” replied Hermione. “Ron’s really been left out a lot of late. We’ve always done things

together ... it just doesn't seem right without him. Plus he has a different way of seeing things, which can be very useful – sometimes.... Do you think we should ask Professor Dumbledore if it's OK?"

"We could ask Dumbledore first," said Rick. "Or ... we could just do it. We seem to be going round-and-round in circles on this Dementor disposal plan. Ron's a very strategic thinker. He might spot something we've missed or find some new angle...."

"Yeah, why don't we just do it...." said Harry, waving to Ron to come and join them.

"Err ... hi," said Ron awkwardly, sitting down next to Harry, across the table from Rick and Hermione. "So what exactly did happen in Diagon Alley yesterday?" he asked, turning to Harry. "You said at breakfast you'd tell me about it. How come you were in Diagon Alley, anyway? And how the hell did you get there?"

Harry looked away from Ron and turned his gaze uncomfortably towards Rick, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"I took him there," said Rick. "I can Apparate. I Apparated with Harry to Diagon Alley yesterday."

"But you're underage," objected Ron, with a suspicious expression on his face. "You can't have an Apparition licence yet. And how come the Ministry haven't picked you up for Apparating without a licence – and underage magic?" demanded Ron.

"Err ... I've found a way to stop them from detecting me," said Rick, with a nervous smile. He was glad that he'd already cast an Imperturbable Charm around their corner of the common room ... Ron only seemed to have two volumes: loud ... and louder.

Ron looked back at Harry. "So, let me get this straight, your scar began hurting when the Death Eaters attacked Diagon Alley, and you Apparated there with Rick, right?"

“Err ... yeah, pretty much,” said Harry, not wanting to mention the fact that he and Rick were flying in their Animagus forms at the time. He and Hermione had told Ron nothing about their Animagus training, and eventual success with the transformation. Since it was completely illegal, Dumbledore had insisted upon keeping it secret.

Ron turned back towards Rick. “I don’t recall reading anything in the Prophet about you being there, Rick. It only mentioned Harry and the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. So how is that?”

“Err ... well, because I used an Invisibility Charm, to hide myself....” said Rick, attempting to avoid Ron’s suspicious gaze.

Ron sat deep in thought for several minutes, occasionally looking at one or other of his companions, but mainly staring hard at Rick through narrowed eyes. Suddenly, he sat up straight in his seat and whacked himself on the forehead with his right hand, before pointing it accusingly across the table at Rick. “You’re the bleeding Ghost of Godric Gryffindor, aren’t you, Rick?”

Thankful, once more for the Imperturbable Charm he’d cast, Rick confirmed Ron’s assertion with a silent nod ... and an embarrassed smile. He hated the way he had to hide things and deceive people – especially his friends. He felt particularly uncomfortable when he got caught out like this. He was unable to look Ron in the eye.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Ron, pounding a fist on the table. “What a great flaming fool I’ve been! It’s so bloody obvious now – why didn’t I spot it sooner? You’ve never been there when the ghost was around. I remember the first time, when Malfoy’s slimy git of a father got Squibbed – you claimed you’d been asleep in your bed. And you were nowhere around that night in the Great Hall when Fudge turned up with that bloody traitor of a brother of mine Percy, and all his Aurors – when Umbridge got it....”

“I’m sorry, Ron,” said Rick apologetically, “but Dumbledore told me to keep it secret. I wanted to tell you —”

“No need to apologise, mate,” said Ron leaning over the table and slapping Rick energetically on the back. “Your ghost impersonation

was fan-bloody-tastic. It's the most brilliant magic I've ever seen! And that Squibbus Curse ... it's bloody amazing! You have my eternal gratitude, mate, for the way you Squibbed Malfoy's dad. Boy, if ever there was a slimy git crying out to be Squibbed, it was him. And that cow Umbridge – she desperately deserved it, too. Well done, mate ... I'm proud of you!"

"Err, thanks, mate," said Rick modestly, relieved that Ron was taking it so well.

"And the way you gave that twit Trelawney a dressing down, too ... you really put one over on her ... it was bloody hilarious! What was the message the ghost had for her? Oh, yeah, I remember. 'Do not disturb' ... and 'Don't call us, we'll call you'. That was so funny, mate. Fred and George were rolling around the floor, when I told them about Trelawney's séance. It was bloody brilliant!"

"Yeah, I have to admit, I really enjoyed myself that night," said Rick, laughing.

"So that explains how the ghost always knows when there's a Death Eater attack!" said Ron, thinking it through. "Harry's scar starts hurting, and he sees the attack. Then, he tells you where it is, and you Apparate off as the ghost and Squib all the Death Eaters. You-Know-Who must be getting royally pissed off by now, with all the Death Eaters he's lost."

"I sincerely hope so," said Rick, grinning.

"But what happened to you that day at Hogsmeade station when we were attacked? The ghost did show up eventually, and take care of the Death Eaters, but it wasn't until five or ten minutes after the attack began. We really had a fight on our hands. We sure could have done with your help a lot sooner, mate. Where the hell did you get to? You were right there on the train with us, just before the attack."

"Err ... I'd really rather not go into that right now, Ron," said Rick blushing. Ron noticed that Hermione was blushing even more than Rick. He looked at her enquiringly.

“Err ... Ron,” stammered Hermione awkwardly, attempting to extricate Rick – and herself – from the uncomfortable direction the conversation was taking and getting it back on track. “We’ve got an urgent problem, which has us all stumped. We were wondering if you might be able to help solve it.”

“Shoot,” said Ron, always ready to take on a perplexing puzzle or search for a solution to a difficult problem. He completely missed how adroitly Hermione had changed the subject on him by baiting him with a challenge.

“Well, the problem is Dementors,” said Hermione. “They are going to attack Hogwarts ... hundreds of them, we think ... and soon.”

“How can you know that?” asked Ron, shivering at the thought of a massive Dementor attack. “Oh, never mind, I should know better by now than asking questions that Dumbledore’s probably told you not to answer. Hmm ... so, how about using Patronuses to drive them off?”

“That’s just a short-term solution,” replied Rick. “We could probably hold them off with Patronuses for a while; but Patronuses don’t weaken Dementors, they’ll keep coming back. There’s probably going to be hundreds of the evil creatures – and they can come at you from any direction they want. It just takes one to sneak up on you and get close enough to affect you, and you’re finished. You can’t cast your Patronus – you’re defenceless; dead – worse than dead....”

“So what hope is there?” asked Ron glumly, biting his bottom lip and shaking his head from side-to-side with worry.

Hermione told Ron about the Time Portal, and explained her idea of using it to maroon the Dementors permanently in the Timeless Dimension.

“Wow!” said Ron. “Now there’s an interesting idea. But how do you know it will work?”

“Because, I’ve already tried it – on some of the Dementors in Diagon Alley, yesterday,” replied Rick. He described how he’d placed the

portal over the entrance to Knockturn Alley, and then used Patronuses to drive the Dementors through it.

“And they just disappeared?” asked Ron, incredulously.

“Yeah, exactly.” confirmed Harry. “I was watching from the other side of the portal. Not a single Dementor came through it into Diagon Alley. The problem, mate, is how to drive hundreds of them through a Time Portal. The ones Rick experimented on yesterday were trapped in Knockturn Alley. There were Patronuses behind them and above them as well. They had nowhere to go but down the alley and through the portal. But when they appear here, at Hogwarts, they’ll be able to go wherever they want. Dumbledore reckons that Patronuses won’t be able to herd them – not when there are hundreds of them and they can go off in any direction.”

“Do you know how the Dementors are going to get into Hogwarts?” asked Ron. “How can they get past the wards?”

“Voldemort’s planning on opening some kind of Spatial Portal for them to come through,” said Hermione. “By the way, it won’t just be Dementors, there will be other Dark Creatures attacking as well —”

“Bloody hell! What kind of Dark Creatures?” asked Ron, nervously.

“We don’t really know,” answered Hermione. “Probably whichever ones he has on his side, like Giants, Trolls, Acromantulas, Banshees, Manticores, Vampires... that sort of thing.”

“Blimey! We’re stuffed!” said Ron, turning white, and letting out a dispirited sigh.

“No, we’re not,” said Rick firmly. “Trust me – I can take care of the Dark Creatures – all of them ... except for the Dementors. They’re the real problem – the ones we need to focus on.”

They fell into silence for a several minutes, as they wracked their brains for ideas.

“I don’t suppose you know where You-Know-Who is going to put this portal thing, do you?” asked Ron half-heartedly.

Hermione shook her head. “Presumably, it will be somewhere within the Hogwarts’ Ward line – but that covers such a vast area – it doesn’t really narrow it down very much at all.”

“Pity,” said Ron. “If we knew exactly where it would be, we could put the Time Portal right in front of it. The Dementors – and all the other Dark Creatures – would simply vanish.”

“We’re not going to know where Voldemort’s Spatial Portal is until his Dark Creatures start spewing out of it,” said Harry.

“Yeah, that’s right,” added Rick. “And once we know where it is, we won’t have time to shape our Time Portal to the right dimensions and position it – especially if we’re under a Dementors attack,” he added with a shiver.

“So can you make this Time Portal any shape you want?” asked Ron.

“Yeah, I think so,” answered Rick. “It’s not something physical, although you can see it – just. It’s a spell which occupies a two-dimensional space. Once it’s created, I can use a Stretching Spell to make it whatever size and shape I want, and then use a Binding Spell to attach it.”

“Could you make it a mile long and a mile wide?” asked Ron, half lost in thought.

“I can’t see why not,” replied Rick. “I think I can make it as big as I want.”

“What are you thinking, Ron?” asked Hermione eagerly. “Are you thinking of positioning a Time Portal over the Hogwarts castle and grounds, so the Dementors will have to pass through it when they come to attack? That might work, you know – although we’d have to make sure Voldemort’s Spatial Portal wasn’t within it – or it would defeat the whole purpose. That’s going to be difficult, since we don’t

know where his portal will be. Plus it would be extremely dangerous ... anyone accidentally passing through it would disappear – forever!”

“No, Hermione,” said Ron grinning. “Hogwarts isn’t where I was thinking of placing it at all – that would be the equivalent in chess of setting a trap within your own lines and waiting for the enemy to attack, and fall into it. It’s a good strategy, but it can be dangerous. If you miscalculate or make a mistake, you usually end up losing. My preferred strategy is to take the attack into the enemy’s territory. That’s what I was thinking we could do ... take the Time Portal to Azkaban and lower it right over the top of the island. Instead of trying to get the Dementors to move through the portal, we move the portal through them.”

The other three were temporarily speechless as they absorbed Ron’s extraordinary idea. Rick was the first to recover. “That’s absolutely brilliant, mate – that really might work! Azkaban is basically a gigantic rock sticking up out of the sea. All the places where the Dementors could be hanging out are well above sea level. If we dropped the portal down onto Azkaban, with the Timeless Zone facing upwards and lower it down to sea level, it would pass through every place where there were Dementors. They would all effectively pass through it.”

“That’s right!” said Hermione excitedly. “In theory, it should work.”

“Won’t the prison and the whole island vanish along with the Dementors?” asked Harry.

The boys all turned expectantly to Hermione. “No, I don’t think so,” she said. “As far as I know, only living things can travel through time. The Dementors will vanish, but inanimate objects like the prison buildings and the island itself shouldn’t be affected.”

“Do we know how big it will need to be?” asked Harry.

“If I remember the dimensions correctly from ‘The Wizarding World Atlas’, the island is about half-a-mile long and almost as wide ... but how are we going to get the portal to Azkaban, and how will we position it over the island?” asked Hermione.

“Four of us will fly it out there on brooms,” answered Ron, with a grin.

“Ron! I am not going to fly all the way out to Azkaban on a broom! I’m a terrible flyer and you know it! I’d fall off before I got even half-way there! You can just forget that idea right now,” said Hermione, narrowing her eyes and glaring at him.

Ron laughed. “Hermione, I said ‘four of us’ not ‘us four’! I didn’t think for a moment that you would be one of the four. I know you don’t like flying. And, nothing personal, but we need four people with excellent broom skills. We’ll find someone else to fly with us to Azkaban.”

“Yeah, like Ginny,” said Harry. “She’s a brilliant flyer – and we can trust Ginny to keep quiet about it.”

“Yeah, mate,” said Ron, turning on Harry and giving him a penetrating look. Harry had inadvertently touched on something which was a very sore point with Ron – and he was instantly sidetracked from the serious matters under discussion. “Like the way she keeps quiet about where she’s always disappearing to in the evenings ... for example? She refuses, point-blank, to tell me. In fact she gets downright shirty with me whenever I ask her where she’s been. Funny thing is, Harry, I just noticed lately, that you seem to disappear, as well – at exactly the same time. So how, exactly, would you explain that?” demanded Ron, belligerently.

“Err ... Ron, it’s —” began Harry, but he was cut off by an infuriated Hermione.

“You should learn to mind your own business, Ron, and leave Ginny to mind hers! She’s old enough, and quite capable of looking after herself – without any help from an over-protective mother hen of a big brother like you! And anyway, you sneak off in the evenings just as much as Ginny ... I wonder if Padma just happens to be sneaking off at the same time?” demanded Hermione, sarcastically.

“That’s ... that’s different,” mumbled Ron defensively, withering under three pairs of accusing eyes.

“Because?” demanded Hermione.

“Well ... because Padma’s not my little sister, for one thing,” said Ron defensively.

“I’m glad to hear that, mate,” said Rick, laughing, attempting to ease the tension. “Err, Ron, can we try to stay focussed on the Dementors, please? Ginny’s honour, and your well-intended, if unsought, efforts at defending it, somehow pale into insignificance when one contemplates Hogwarts over-run by Dementors – wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yeah, alright...” said Ron, giving Harry a final glare. “So, where were we, then?”

“Flying off to Azkaban with Rick’s Time Portal,” said Hermione quickly, before Ron could get back to attacking Harry. “I can see two distinct dangers with your plan, Ron. Firstly, if anyone but Rick should accidentally pass through the portal in the active direction – which is from beneath – they’ll be lost forever in the Timeless Dimension, with no way of getting back, or any hope of rescue. The other problem will be Dementors. The front pair will have to over-fly the island, or at least pass right along its sides. That will be close enough for the Dementors to sense them – and come after them.”

The four of them lapsed into a long silence, which was finally broken by Harry. “Sirius said that when he was in his Animagus dog form in Azkaban, he hardly felt the Dementors, and they didn’t sense him – that’s how he escaped. So, Rick, what if you and I...”

“Yeah ... I know exactly what you’re thinking, mate – and you’re dead right.” said Rick. “When I rescued Hermione from Azkaban, the Dementors didn’t seem to sense me at all after I transformed.”

“Of course!” said Hermione.

“Hang on, hang on, the lot of you!” yelled Ron, holding up both hands. “What is all this about rescuing Hermione from Azkaban – and Animagus transformations?” he demanded, looking intensely at Rick.

“Well, when Voldemort abducted Hermione at Christmas, she was being held at Azkaban,” explained Rick. “That’s where I went to rescue her. Err ... by the way, I’m an Animagus, Ron ... look, mate, Dumbledore made us promise not to talk about the rescue, so please don’t press me on it ... OK? The point is that Harry and I can fly in the lead in our Animagus forms.”

“Bloody hell! Are you an Animagus too?!” demanded Ron, turning towards Harry in amazement.

“Err ... yeah, mate,” replied Harry, turning away from Ron’s intense gaze, and feeling very uncomfortable at having hidden it from him. “A Golden Eagle – but Dumbledore insisted that I keep it secret – it’s completely illegal. I really wanted to tell you, but —”

“Of course! It’s all so bleeding obvious now! I always thought that story about you using a Hover Charm to come down after your broom got yanked out from under you in the Quidditch match was a load of old cobblers! You bloody-well transformed into an eagle and flew off, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Harry, grinning at Ron. “Actually, that was the very first time I ever succeeded with the transformation, although I’d been working on it for months.”

“The first time?! You’re amazing mate!” replied Ron, shaking his head in disbelief. “They don’t call you The Boy Who Lived for nothing! I don’t know how many times you’ve defied death – just by the skin of your teeth – it’s too many to count. So that explains why you three were disappearing almost every evening after we came back from the Christmas holidays. Was McGonagall giving the three of you Animagus training?”

“No,” replied Rick. “McGonagall told Dumbledore she thought Harry and Hermione might be able to master the Animagus transformation. But they are below the legal age – and anyway, there’s so much red tape that it simply isn’t possible to do it legally anymore. Dumbledore knew McGonagall would feel uncomfortable about getting involved in anything illegal – being such a prim and proper sort – so he ... err ... asked me to teach them. Err ... I was already an Animagus.”

“So, have you mastered the transformation, too?” asked Ron turning to Hermione.

“Well, of course I have,” replied Hermione, sounding piqued, as if Ron was insinuating that she wasn’t up to it. “I’m a fox.”

“Congratulations – both of you, that’s bloody impressive.” said Ron. But his voice betrayed mixed emotions. He felt genuine happiness and admiration for his friends’ remarkable achievement; but it was tempered by a deep sense of envy, and a feeling of missing out – yet again – and not measuring up. It was a recurring theme in Ron’s life, being the youngest of six brothers, all of whom had excelled and succeeded in their chosen course in life ... even the twins, with their joke shop and their Weasley’ Wizzarding Wheezes.

“So, err ... getting back to Azkaban,” said Rick, breaking the awkward silence that followed, as Ron looked from Harry to Hermione, with a forced grin. “If Harry and I are in front, in our bird Animagus forms, the Dementors won’t sense us – or affect us as we fly along the sides of the island. I can magically attach long ropes to each corner of the Time Portal. That will allow us to keep our distance from it, which should help to avoid any nasty accidents. The other benefit is that Ron and Ginny won’t need to cross Azkaban, or come too close to the island – and the Dementors.”

“It’s still going to be risky, but it might just work,” said Hermione. “It’s the only plan we have with any chance of success, so I think we’re going to have to give it a try.”

“I’ll ask Ginny if she wants to be in on it,” said Harry. “I’ll only tell her as much as she needs to know. Ginny will be OK with that ... she trusts me.”

Ron glared at Harry again, but before he could make a comment, Rick rushed in. “I’ll go talk to Dumbledore and see what he thinks of the plan. Err ... Ron, I know there are lots of things bugging you right now, and you’ve been left out a lot lately; but there’s something you need to know.... Getting rid of the Dementors is absolutely critical to winning the war. If we can’t get rid of them, we’ll lose ... it’s as simple

as that. This plan of yours – if it works – will be the difference between winning and losing. It will be remembered as the strategy that won the war. You can be very proud of yourself, mate.”

“That’s absolutely, right, Ron,” said Hermione smiling at him encouragingly. “If we don’t get rid of the Dementors ... Hogwarts will be destroyed – everything will be lost.”

“Yeah, mate,” said Harry. “We’ve been going round-and-round in circles on this one. We just couldn’t figure out a way to get rid of the Dementors – and neither could Dumbledore. Your plan is bloody brilliant.”

Ron blushed beneath the praise of his friends and looked down at the table silently for a while. “Yeah,” he said finally, looking up. “Let’s just hope to hell it works!”

“Yeah, mate” said Harry, smiling at him and holding up both hands with his fingers crossed. “Keep your fingers crossed and hope for the best!”

I hope you enjoyed this nice quiet chapter (Ron’s outbursts excepted) ...This was the calm before the storm. From here on it’s non-stop action ... all the way to the final curse....

This fic is now complete. There are 4 more chapters plus an Epilogue, which I will post as quickly as I get them back from my betas ... currently it’s taking the slowest of them about a week per chapter.

If there are any experienced betas out there who would like to help with the last few chapters, please click on Author: GoGG at the very top of this page to go to my profile and then click on email to send me a message.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 30 - The Flying Squad

Ron and Ginny Weasley brought their brooms in to land on the barren headland. They had been flying in tight formation with Harry in his Golden Eagle Animagus form in the lead followed by Ginny, Ron, and Rick, in his Peregrine Falcon form at the rear. They had remained very watchful, ever since leaving Hogwarts, in case their sortie was detected by Voldemort's Death Eaters. But the long flight had been uneventful. Harry, who had been scouting ahead for a large flat area on the Scottish coast, had led them to this desolate place. The brisk sea breeze caused the clumps of grass and shrubs to wave about in the bright sunshine. The air carried the sharp scent of the ocean.

Upon landing, Harry and Rick transformed. "You were magnificent, Harry," gushed Ginny admiringly. She had spent most of the flight, mere metres behind Harry, watching him fly in awe. She had to resist the impulse to throw her arms around him and hug him ... knowing perfectly well that Ron would probably explode. They all needed to stay focussed on their dangerous mission today ... and teamwork was going to be crucial.

Professor Dumbledore had been very impressed with Ron's plan. It was a dangerous gambit; but it was their only hope of getting rid of the Dementors. Dumbledore was well aware that unless the Dementors were removed from the equation, Hogwarts would almost certainly be destroyed. His backup plan was to send all the students home at the Easter break, and close Hogwarts indefinitely. He could not risk the lives of his students and professors. Although most students remained at Hogwarts over Easter, they were allowed to return home for the break upon parental request. Just as Dumbledore had anticipated, such requests were received from all known Death Eaters with children at Hogwarts. The pretext, obviously intended to hide the true intention, was a gala garden party being hosted by the Parkinsons for their Pureblood acquaintances on the Easter Sunday.

The weekend before Easter was chosen as the best time for the Azkaban operation. The weather had warmed up enough to make the long flight on broomsticks endurable. It also gave them plenty of time for the meticulous planning required for a successful outcome.

Rick asked the others to sit well away on some rocks, while he got to work creating the Time Portal. They were all very aware of the danger of accidentally passing through it. “Tempus iunctus nunc ad nihilum vaccus,” he intoned. A shimmering fabric emerged from his wand. It was transparent, with a light-blue tinge, making it almost invisible in the bright sunlight, as it hovered horizontally about three feet from the ground.

Rick mounted Ginny’s broom, and flying twenty feet above the ground, he began stretching the portal to the required size. He used a magical measure Hermione had given him to ensure it was exactly right. They had decided to make it one hundred metres longer and wider than the island, to put some distance between themselves, and Azkaban’s deadly inhabitants. Rick conjured four ropes, which he enchanted to be weightless, like the portal. They were twenty metres long. He attached a rope to each corner of the portal. The ropes would allow them to keep a safe distance from the portal, and a little further away, again, from Azkaban. Finally, he used an attaching spell to bind one rope to Ginny’s broom and another to Ron’s. When the time came, Ginny and Ron would use detaching spells to remove them.

“OK, so we’re all ready,” said Rick, nervously, as the four of them stood close together, feeling excited – and also extremely apprehensive. “Now remember, you two,” Rick said to Ron and Ginny, “if things go wrong, just let go of the portal and get the hell out of there ... fast! OK?”

Ginny and Ron nodded grimly. There were so many things that could go wrong – and most of them involved Dementors. Although they were both proficient in casting a Patronus – thanks to coaching from Harry and Rick – none of them wanted to contemplate dealing with hordes of Dementors. They all looked at each other with grim determination. “Let’s do it!” said Harry, before transforming into a Golden Eagle and beating his large wings powerfully as he rose purposefully into the air. Rick transformed into a falcon and joined him, circling around as they waited for Ginny and Ron to get to their brooms, which were some distance away. When they reached the brooms, they mounted them and began rising up slowly. Harry and Rick swooped down, each grasping an end of the leading ropes with their claws.

Before heading out across the ocean, they rose upwards, to around a thousand feet. They didn't want any Muggle fishermen spotting Ginny and Ron on brooms, and they wanted to be high above Azkaban when they arrived. That would keep them well clear of the Dementors until they began lowering the portal.

After a nervous, but mercifully uneventful, half-hour of flying, Rick and Harry, with their keen eyesight, spotted the dark shape of Azkaban looming forebodingly before them as it jutted out from the sea. As they drew closer, the ugly grey prison buildings that sat atop the island became distinguishable. They were at least seven hundred feet above the highest point of the island as they began passing over it, one on each side. From this height, no movement or sign of life was visible on the island below.

Rick felt a pang of fear and a sense of deep apprehension as terrible visions of the Dementors of Azkaban flooded unbidden into his mind. He struggled hard to repress those dreadful memories of being surrounded by hundreds of Dementors in that bleak stinking courtyard, of their stench, of the horrible rasping rattling noise they made, and of the foul slimy lips of the Dementor that tried to suck out his soul. But the Dementors would not be able to sense him today. He and Harry, in their bird Animagus forms, were safe. It was Ginny and Ron who were in danger. No one knew at what distance Dementors could sense their victims. None of them had any idea if Ginny and Ron would be far enough from the island avoid detection.

Finally, they reached their intended position. The Time Portal was now halfway across Azkaban Island. The plan was to continue moving forward across the island as they slowly descended, so that the portal completely covered the island when they reached ground level. Rick spread his wings to begin the slow descent. This was the signal to the others to do likewise.

Everything was going to plan. They were now only a hundred metres above the prison, and still there was no sign of Dementors. Rick began to worry that the evil creatures might no longer be on the island. Could Voldemort have moved them in preparation for the attack on Hogwarts? he asked himself as he swivelled his head from

side-to-side to check on Ginny and Ron as they continued downwards. Suddenly he saw them – twenty or more Dementors, charging upwards – and straight towards Ginny. It was their worst nightmare! Rick let go of his rope and dived to gain speed – and to get well beneath the portal, as he sped in Ginny's direction.

Ginny spotted the Dementors coming towards her almost the moment they began rising up from the island in front of her. She and Ron were both on the lookout for them. She used the detaching charm to free her broom from the rope attached to the portal, and shot up in the air away from the Dementors and Azkaban. Ron, who had been keeping an eye on his sister, as well as looking out for Dementors, saw what was happening and freed his broom from the portal also. Since it was weightless, it would just hover, stationary, in the air. Ron sped towards the Dementors who were pursuing Ginny, firing his bull-shaped Patronus at them. It lowered its horns as it charged, driving them well away from Ginny.

But, Ron's relief at Ginny's escape was short-lived. Suddenly, he felt a terrible chill assail him. Twisting around on his broom he saw them – thirty Dementors closing on him fast. But his fear of the Dementors was replaced by an even greater terror as he gazed in horror upon an enormous dragon flying straight towards him. Bloody hell, where did that monster come from? thought Ron. What the hell am I supposed to do now? In fact there was only one thing he could do: go up – and fast. Ron shot upwards, almost vertically, hunched desperately over his broom, dreading the immanent terrifying chill of the Dementors – or the furnace of the dragon's fire. But, when miraculously, neither eventuated, he cautiously, he looked down. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The dragon was breathing great sheets of flame at the Dementors, who did not appear to be enjoying it at all. Ron saw them turn and flee, back towards the island. He flew over to Ginny. "Where the hell did that dragon come from?" he asked her, when he reached her side. "And how come it's attacking the Dementors instead of us?"

"It's Rick!" said Ginny. "I saw him transform straight from a falcon into that enormous dragon. It's a Norwegian Ridgeback, I think."

“Bloody hell!” said Ron. “He could have told us, I almost fell off my broom when I saw that monster coming straight at me! Listen, Gin, Rick managed to get the Dementors who were chasing us back to the island – but, look, there are hundreds of them now, swarming all over the place – Blood hell! They’re starting to rise up in the air. There’s no way Rick can herd that many back to the island. Hey! I’ve got an idea ... follow me! Quick!”

Ginny got the surprise of her life when Ron headed at full speed straight back towards Azkaban. Taking a deep breath, she gripped her broom tightly and sped off after him. He was too far ahead for her to ask what the hell he was doing ... she was just going to have to trust him. Soon they were flying about fifty feet above the portal, with the island of Azkaban beneath them. When they were directly above the prison, Ron began circling slowly.

By now, Ginny had caught on to what Ron was attempting to do. He was deliberately trying to get the Dementors to attack them – from below – and it was working – brilliantly. The Dementors, rising up from Azkaban in their hundreds, were attracted to them – like bees to honey. They flew straight up, towards Ron and Ginny, but, when they reached the portal, they simply disappeared. They seemed to be completely oblivious to what was happening, or why the Dementors ahead of them were disappearing. They were starved for human souls and seemed to be capable of one thought only: Get to the two humans, and suck out their souls.

Wave after wave of Dementors continued flying towards them and disappearing as they hit the portal. It went on for almost five minutes. “Ron, you’re a genius!” said Ginny, joyfully. “That was the most brilliant trick I’ve ever seen! There don’t seem to be any more Dementors attacking us. Do you think there could be any more down there on the island?”

“I don’t know,” replied Ron. “There could be — Hey, Ginny, look, here’s Rick! He’s turned back into a falcon again.”

Rick came down on the handle of Ron’s broom and stared at him.

“Rick, can you understand me?” asked Ron.

Rick gave a very distinct nod.

“Well, err ... I think we’ve gotten rid of all the Dementors,” said Ron, feeling a bit silly, talking to a bird. “But, just to be sure, I think we should complete the plan and lower the portal down to sea level – just in case there are more Dementors down there. Do you agree?”

Rick nodded again.

“So when, exactly, were you going to tell us that you are also a bloody dragon Animagus, as well?” demanded Ron, reproachfully. But, realising that Rick wasn’t able to reply – and this was hardly the time or place to take issue with Rick over his secrecy, he quickly changed tack. “OK, so let’s all grab our ropes then.... I guess you can communicate with Harry, right?”

Rick nodded.

“He’s still holding onto his rope, so if you let him know what’s happening, we can get on with it. Afterwards, fly down to the prison and check that all the Dementors are gone, like we planned, and then destroy the portal. OK?”

Rick nodded again, before flying off towards Harry. Ron and Ginny returned to their positions and took hold of their ropes. When all four of them were in place, they slowly lowered the portal until it was at sea level. Ron and Ginny let go of their ropes and flew back up to wait for Rick. They were soon joined by Harry who was circling them happily.

Rick came down and landed in the bleak cobblestone courtyard, in the centre of the prison. He changed into his own form, shuddering as he took in his surroundings, and remembered his previous time here, surrounded by hundreds of horrible Dementors. Pushing these unwanted thoughts away, Rick created a magical map of the island in his mind. There was not a single Dementor showing anywhere. Professor Dumbledore had been certain that every single Dementor in existence had been here at Azkaban – which meant that they all gone – every last loathsome one of them.

Rick transformed back into a falcon and flew down to the shoreline, landing on a large boulder a few feet above the portal, which was hovering an inch or two above the sea. He changed back to his human form once more and cast the spell to destroy the Time Portal.

His happy feelings at finally ridding their world of the dreaded Dementors were interrupted by Harry diving towards him. Harry immediately transformed. "Death Eaters, on brooms, Rick! Thirty or forty of them, headed this way – Ron and Ginny haven't seen them yet – we've got to do something!"

"I'll transform into a dragon," said Rick. "You'll be more use with your wand on my back, than as an eagle. Hop up on my back – while I transform and then climb up into the saddle, OK?"

"OK, but be quick!" yelled Harry urgently, jumping up on Rick's back and immediately finding himself being thrown up into the air. He grabbed hold of a harness strap, and climbed over the dragon's rough scales until he reached the saddle, and strapped himself in. Finding what appeared to be a set of reins, Harry pulled on them to let Rick know he was ready to go. Rick unfurled his massive wings and flapped them powerfully, rising slowly into the air.

Damn it! thought Rick as he began flying towards Ginny and Ron with powerful beats of his enormous wings. The Death Eaters must have created some kind of magical warning system which was activated when the Dementors sensed Ginny and Ron. After my rescue of Hermione, there's probably been a bunch of them stationed across on the mainland, ready to scramble and head for Azkaban if intruders were detected again.

By now, the Death Eaters had reached Ginny and Ron, who, although greatly outnumbered were using their superior broom skills to dart about and dodge the barrage of curses and hexes. They were soon half-a-mile apart, forcing the Death Eaters to split into two groups to pursue them. The Death Eaters chasing Ginny spread themselves around her and began flinging curses at her from different directions. It was becoming increasingly difficult for her to dodge them all.

As Rick approached, Harry saw Ginny take a direct hit. She had been badly hexed, and was clinging desperately to her broom. Since it was hard to make a direct hit on a swiftly moving broom, the Death Eaters now resorted to firing Blasting Curses in Ginny's direction. These were buffeting her broom and making it very difficult for her to control, in her weakened state. It was zigzagging wildly about the sky as Blasting Curses exploded all around her. Ginny was in imminent danger of being thrown from her broom into the sea – far below.

Harry quickly released himself from the dragon saddle and transformed into an eagle; flying off at top speed towards Ginny. Her erratic movements made it very difficult for him to land on her broom. As he closed in on her, a blasting curse exploded only feet away, knocking Ginny from her broom. Desperately, she grasped the broom with her hands, dangling helplessly beneath it.

Harry was knocked off course by the Blasting Curse, but, making full use of the skills he had honed in the many hours flying with Rick, he finally managed to catch hold of Ginny's wildly-careening broom with his powerful claws. He immediately transformed, throwing his legs around the broom, and casting a Reflecting Shield around himself and Ginny, who was hanging desperately beneath him.

Harry quickly brought the broom under control, and stopped its wild dance. Then he lay flat on the broom and grabbed hold of one of Ginny's arms. Harry tried to pull Ginny up onto the broom, but it was impossible. Ginny was barely conscious by now, and unable to perform the standard Quidditch manoeuvre, of hefting herself up, to lie across the broomstick. Harry had an idea. If she can't pull herself up, I'll just have to drop the broom down. He sent the broom vertically downwards about a metre and a little to the left in a sudden movement. As a result, Ginny suddenly bobbed up, relative to the broom. Harry, still grasping her arm, pulled her over the handle and held her there securely in the broom rescue position.

While all of this was happening the Death Eaters were slowly recovering from the shock of seeing Harry Potter mysteriously appear on the injured girl's broom. Some of them had noticed the eagle flying about, but none had noticed it transform into their master's greatest

enemy. They assumed that Potter had been on the broom all along, hidden beneath an invisibility cloak which had been blown away by a Blasting Curse. The Death Eaters were even more surprised when, having secured the girl across the broomstick, rather than attempting to evade them, Potter turned to face them.

The twenty or so Death Eaters couldn't believe their luck at having Harry Potter, within wand-range, outnumbered twenty-to-one – a sitting duck – his hands full with keeping an unconscious girl on a broom. They weren't planning on taking any prisoners today ... this was going to be too easy ... "Let Potter have it!" yelled one of the Death Eaters. "Avada Kedavra!" screamed a dozen Death Eaters in unison, letting loose a volley of Killing Curses. The curses hit Harry's shield and rebounded back upon the Death Eaters who had cast them. They died instantly, their bodies plummeting along with their brooms into the sea, far below.

When Harry flew off to help Ginny, Rick had decided to go help Ron, who was being pursued by the second group of Death Eaters. Before he could reach him, he saw Ron hit by a powerful hex. Rick could do nothing, but look on helplessly, as his friend plummeted thirty feet to the sea, hitting it with a loud smack. Hoping desperately that Ron was still alive, Rick swooped down and carefully lifted him out of the sea, grasping him under the arms with his powerful claws. Rick then turned his attention to the Death Eaters, who were stunned to find an enormous dragon in their midst, belching flames. Rick was careful not to incinerate the Death Eaters. Instead, he set the ends of their brooms on fire. The Death Eaters fled back towards the mainland, frantically casting Extinguishing Spells on their smouldering, charred brooms.

Rick flew over to where he could see Harry holding Ginny as she lay across her broomstick. They were surrounded by eight Death Eaters who had just witnessed twelve of their companions plunge into the sea after being struck by their own rebounding Killing Curses. They were arguing about how to proceed, when they suddenly found themselves set upon by a fierce fire-breathing dragon. They needed no further encouragement ... to turn tail and flee.

Spotting Ron, hanging limply from Rick's claws, Harry quickly flew up to the dragon saddle and carefully strapped Ginny in. Then he flew around in front of the dragon's head on Ginny's broom so Rick could see what he was doing, before flying down to Ron. Harry positioned the broom so that it was against Ron's stomach, and grasped hold of one of Ron's arms. With his other hand he twisted the end of one of the Dragon's claws, hoping Rick would understand the signal. He did, and slowly released his grip on Ron, allowing Harry to drag him across the broomstick.

Harry flew Ron up to the dragon saddle and after a bit of a struggle, managed to squeeze Ron in beside Ginny and strap them both in securely. He was relieved to find Ron was still breathing, albeit very shallowly. There was an unhealthy bluish tinge to his face and lips, and blood was trickling from his nose and mouth. Ron was also completely wet. Harry hadn't seen what had happened to his friend, but it was obvious that he had been in the chilly water, and was freezing cold. He cast a drying charm on Ron's clothes, and then a heating charm around the saddle. There wasn't much more he could do for his friend right now.

They had to get Ron and Ginny back to the mainland as quickly as possible, so Rick could transform and check them over. Harry had a very bad feeling about Ron. If only he could hang on until they got him back to Hogwarts ... he might have a chance.... Harry gave a tug on the dragon's reins, then transformed back into an eagle, to lighten Rick's load. Rick got the message, and began flying as fast as he could towards the mainland, with Harry flying beside his huge head. As they crossed the coast, Harry used one of their common bird gestures to indicate that they should land. They came down on the same barren headland where Rick had constructed the Time Portal a few hours earlier.

Rick first examined Ginny. He quickly healed the effects of the curse she'd been hit with. Ginny regained consciousness, although she was a little dazed at first. However, when she saw Ron, she became very quickly alert – and worried. Rick was examining Ron carefully, moving his hand gently above his chest and abdomen. Harry stood behind Ginny and wrapped his arms around her to comfort her as they both looked on, anxiously.

“He’s really in a bad way,” said Rick, finally. “I think I’ve managed to stop the internal bleeding, but I don’t have enough experience to do much more. We have to get him to Hogwarts as quickly as possible.”

“It’ll take too long to fly him there on your back,” said Harry. “Your dragon Animagus is nowhere near as fast as the falcon. How about you Apparate the four of us back?”

“Apparate us?” asked Ginny, surprised. “Can you do that?”

“Err, yeah,” answered Rick. “Right, everyone hold hands. I’ll Apparate us to behind that clump of trees near the Hogwarts gates, then we’ll conjure a stretcher and use the Mobilicorpus spell to get Ron to the hospital wing. OK?” Harry and Ginny nodded. Ginny knelt down next Ron and took his hand in hers, holding Harry’s hand with her other. Rick grasped Harry’s other hand and they were gone.

Madam Pomfrey had been examining Ron for over ten minutes, moving her wand over various parts of his body, and muttering spells which made her wand glow different colours – but mostly, an ominous blood red. Her face was very serious, and as the examination progressed, her expression showed increasing concern. She exchanged the occasional whispered comment with Professor Snape who was standing nearby, and looking even more sombre than usual. Professor Dumbledore had requested the Potion Master’s assistance as soon as the seriousness of Ron’s condition became evident.

Rick had fetched Hermione, and they were standing close to Harry and Ginny, in a corner of the room. The four of them looked on, with growing anxiety, as Madam Pomfrey proceeded with the examination. Even from that distance, it was clear that Ron was barely alive. He lay unconscious, his face had an unhealthy white pallor, and his breathing was shallow and irregular.

Suddenly, the door swung open and Padma rushed in. She immediately tried to rush to Ron, but Harry stepped forward and

caught her, holding her firmly to prevent her interrupting Madam Pomfrey.

“Harry, what’s happened to Ron?” she cried distraughtly. “Luna said she saw him being brought in on a stretcher, and it looked like he was very badly injured. He’s going to be alright, isn’t he?” she demanded frantically.

Hermione and Ginny each put an arm around Padma, who was extremely distressed and still puffing heavily from running all the way from Ravenclaw Tower. “We don’t know yet,” said Hermione, trying to sound more hopeful than she felt. “Madam Pomfrey is still examining him.”

Finally, the nurse turned to Professor Dumbledore who was standing behind her. “I am very sorry, Headmaster,” she said, letting out a long, sad sigh, “but I’m afraid there is nothing more I can do for him ... I’ve tried to make him as comfortable as possible. He has suffered massive internal lacerations which are quite beyond my ability to heal. I know of no Healer, or magic, that can reverse such severe injuries. I can only suggest that you contact his parents. If they are very quick they may get here in time to see him, before....” But, she couldn’t continue. She pulled out a large white handkerchief and dried her eyes, before turning away.

Professor Dumbledore turned gravely towards Snape, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

“I am afraid I must concur with Madam Pomfrey’s prognosis, Headmaster,” he said solemnly. “There is no potion, or anything else I know of, that can save him. He has suffered enormous internal damage. The best I can offer is a powerful analgesic concoction to dull the pain, should he regain consciousness, before he.... I shall brew it immediately,” he said, turning and striding solemnly from the room.

“Thank you, Poppy,” said Dumbledore comfortingly to the nurse. “You have done your very best for him, I cannot ask for more.” The nurse nodded then left the room sobbing.

Padma and Ginny both began crying uncontrollably. Harry wrapped an arm around each of them as he fought back his own tears.

“Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione quietly. “Perhaps —”

The Headmaster held up his hand to silence her, gently nodding his head and fixing her with an understanding glance. “Miss Patil, Miss Weasley, please accompany me to Madam Pomfrey’s office. I shall ask her to give you both a tonic to help you cope with your distress.” As he escorted them from the room, he turned back, catching Rick’s eye, and glancing meaningfully towards the door.

The moment the door had closed, Rick placed a locking spell on it with a brief gesture. Hermione was already at Ron’s side. She placed a hand on either side of his head and closed her eyes. She was soon lost in deep concentration.

“What’s she doing, Rick?” whispered Harry.

“Empathetic magic, I think,” replied Rick softly. “She’s trying to determine the exact nature of Ron’s injuries. She’s finding out which organs are injured and how they are damaged, so she can repair them.”

“Can she really do that?” asked Harry hopefully. “I mean, Madam Pomfrey is very skilled in magical healing – believe me, I know from experience – and she said nothing could be done. Do you really think Hermione can save him?”

“I sure as hell hope so,” said Rick. “If anyone can, Hermione can.”

Hermione had opened her eyes now, and was moving her hands in slow circular motions, about an inch or two above Ron’s abdomen. Her eyes were fixed upon her hands in intense concentration. A soft white glow began to emanate from them. It appeared to be some kind of energy; and it was flowing from the palms of her hands into Ron’s body. After working on his abdomen for several minutes, Hermione gradually moved her hands up Ron’s body, continuing the circular motion. She paused for a minute or two over his chest, before finally

bringing her hands up to his face. All the while, the strange soft glow came from them and flowed into Ron.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. Ron suddenly opened his eyes and began looking around in a daze, and there was a loud banging on the door. "Madam Pomfrey! Why is this door locked?" demanded a very annoyed Professor Snape.

"Ah, Severus, there you are," said Dumbledore, calmly, "back with the potion already? That was quick."

Rick looked at Ron and smiled broadly, then he looked at Hermione. "All done?" he asked. "Can I let him in before he starts on the Blasting Curses?" Hermione nodded happily. She was holding Ron's hand and smiling like a Cheshire Cat. Rick flicked his hand at the door, and it suddenly sprang open, to reveal Snape, the Headmaster, and Madam Pomfrey. They all entered the room, closely followed by Ginny and Padma, who, seeing Ron awake and very much alive, immediately rushed over to him and flung her arms around him, kissing him.

Everyone was talking at once. Snape was demanding to know what the hell Harry, Hermione, and Rick were doing in the room, and what they had done to the door. Padma had thrown her arms around Ron's neck and was showering his face with kisses. Ginny was grasping one of Ron's hands, and weeping with joy at seeing him alive and well, after having given up all hope. Madam Pomfrey, meanwhile, was trying to prise Padma off her patient and get to him herself. Professor Dumbledore stood calmly off to one side, surveying the chaos with an amused smile on his face, his blue eyes twinkling. When they fell upon Hermione, he smiled at her warmly and nodded his head in a gesture of recognition of her miraculous achievement.

Madam Pomfrey had to resort to threatening Padma and Ginny with hexes, to get them to step back from Ron, who was shaking his head from side-to-side in confusion at the bedlam surrounding him. The nurse proceeded to repeat the diagnostic tests with her wand. Professor Snape was, once again, standing beside her. Instead of his previous undertaker impersonation, this time he was gaping in disbelief – firstly at Madam Pomfrey's wand, which was now

consistently glowing a soft blue colour; and secondly, at Ron Weasley, who looked a picture of health.

“I cannot understand it, Headmaster,” she finally declared, shaking her head in wonder. “Not five minutes ago, all his internal organs were ruptured and damaged. There had been massive internal haemorrhaging. But now ... he’s completely healthy. Every organ is in perfect condition, and functioning faultlessly. In all my reading of the great Magical Healers, I have never come across an account of so remarkable a recovery ... well, at least not since the time of Jesus Christ, himself.” She shook her head in disbelief, before finally adding. “How is this possible? How could he have been healed?”

“A very good question indeed, Madam Pomfrey,” said Snape, fixing Rick with a penetrating gaze. “Most significantly, this is not the first time that I have witnessed a remarkable recovery from an apparently irreversible condition. Something equally miraculous happened quite recently in the case of....” But Snape trailed off as he remembered the need to keep the miraculous recovery of Hermione’s parents secret. “I am sure there is a perfectly logical explanation,” he added after a few moments, as he continued to stare hard at Rick, an eyebrow raised questioningly.

“It was the ghost!”

Every eye in the room turned upon Ron in shock. These were the first words he had spoken, and they caught everyone by surprise.

“What? What on earth are you talking about, Mr. Weasley?” demanded Snape, glaring down intimidatingly at Ron, lying in his bed.

“Err ... well, when I woke up and opened my eyes, just now, I heard this rasping voice saying, ‘There we are lad, you’re all better now – as good as new. I can’t have one of my own Gryffindors dying on me, now can I?’ I recognised the voice, from that time in the Great Hall, when he Squibbed Umbridge, and also from Trelawn ... err, Professor Trelawney’s séance in the Gryffindor common room. I’d know that voice anywhere – it was the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor – I’m sure of it,” affirmed Ron, carefully avoiding Snape’s withering gaze.

“Poppycock!” exclaimed Snape. “Your body may be recovered, Mr. Weasley, but clearly you’ve suffered irreparable brain damage. Either that – or you are deliberately lying to both myself and the Headmaster. Which is it, Mr. Weasley?” he demanded menacingly.

“Now, now, Severus,” said Dumbledore gently. “Mr. Weasley’s explanation is, in fact, quite plausible. While it appears to be entirely miraculous and beyond all known magic, let me remind you that such extraordinary things have been happening all year, both around Hogwarts, and beyond. And, their source has indeed been the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor.”

Snape concealed a snort, keeping his silence, as he stared hard at Rick, who, coincidentally, had also been at Hogwarts all year. Dumbledore, no doubt, had his reasons for encouraging the disinformation about Gryffindor’s ghost being responsible for all the extraordinary events – and Snape was not about to contradict him on it publicly. He was almost certain, by now, that Rick Godfry, and not some absurd ghost, was the true cause. Looking briefly towards the Headmaster, Snape surreptitiously raised an eyebrow, to indicate that he wasn’t fooled by this fabrication, before turning and striding quickly from the room. Dumbledore’s blue eyes were twinkling merrily.

Padma had taken the opportunity to move back to Ron, and was once again leaning over the bed, hugging and kissing him. She was so happy to have him alive and well, she seemed oblivious to the others in the room.

“That’s quite enough of that, young lady!” growled Madam Pomfrey, having regaining her composure – and her usual stern demeanour. “This is the hospital wing – not the Astronomy Tower. Mr. Weasley needs rest – not excitement. He will remain here under my observation for the remainder of the weekend. Now, everyone, out!”

“But, why can’t I go too?” asked Ron. “I’ve never felt better in my life, why do I have to —”

“Twenty minutes ago, we were about to arrange your funeral, Mr. Weasley,” said the nurse severely. “You may feel fit as a fiddle now,

but you will remain under my observation for the next twenty-four hours, minimum! Is that understood?"

"Yes," said Ron, sighing in resignation.

"That's better," said Madam Pomfrey, somewhat appeased. "If you behave yourself, Weasley, you may receive visitors tomorrow after breakfast. But please, avoid engaging in any activities that are likely to excite him," she said, looking pointedly at Padma. "Now, all of you, out of here and let Mr. Weasley get some rest."

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 31 - Assault of the Dark Creatures

High above Hogwarts, two birds circled in the early-morning light. The Golden Eagle began a graceful descent, alighting on the parapet of the West Tower, which was bathed in morning sunshine. Jumping down from the parapet, Harry transformed. Ron, who had been staring out towards the Forbidden Forest, and the Peregrine Falcon which was flying along its edge, turned and looked enquiringly at his friend.

“Nothing yet,” said Harry. It was the first day of the final school term. Just as Dumbledore had predicted, the children of suspected Death Eaters had not returned from the Easter break. Draco Malfoy was one of the few Slytherins on the Hogwarts Express when it arrived in Hogsmeade the previous evening. Evidently, his mother had taken heed of the warning given by the ‘Ghost of Godric Gryffindor’, and cut all ties with her Squibbed husband’s former associates and her other acquaintances on the Dark Side. It appeared that, in consequence, she had not been warned of the impending attack.

Harry and Rick had been flying reconnaissance missions above the Hogwarts grounds since first light. Dumbledore expected the attack of Voldemort’s Dark Creatures to come in the first few days of the new term – very possibly today; and they did not want to be caught unawares. If and when the attack came, Ron would notify the Headmaster immediately. Dumbledore had Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, plus a number of others on stand-by – ready to join him in defending Hogwarts. The remaining staff would gather all the students together and barricade them in the deepest dungeons until the attack was over. Each of the professors involved in the school’s defence had been assigned a tower or some other strategic location – but none were assigned to the West Tower, where Rick and Harry were stationed. Dumbledore hoped to keep Harry’s Animagus ability and Rick’s powers secret.

“Have Hermione and Ginny shown up with breakfast yet?” asked Harry, hopefully.

“No, not yet, mate,” replied Ron, grumpily. “I’ve been awake for at least two hours now, and I haven’t eaten a thing. I’m starving to death

up here, while the whole school's down in the Great Hall eating breakfast," he complained.

"Don't worry, mate, it'll be here soon ... just remember to leave some for me ... or I might have to catch my own," joked Harry, before transforming back into an eagle and flying off towards the lake.

Five minutes later, the falcon came in to land and transformed into Rick. "Still no sign of any attackers," he said to Ron.

"And there's nothing to eat yet, either," grumbled Ron, "I'm getting bloody hungry up here, I could eat a —"

"What's that?" exclaimed Rick, holding his hand up to silence Ron, and staring off into space. It was Hermione summoning him through their Empathetic Magic link. "Hermione's in trouble!" cried Rick, closing his eyes for a moment and projecting a magical map of the castle. From her summons, he already knew where she was, but he wanted to find out who was with her. "Draco Malfoy!" he spat. "He must have jumped Hermione and Ginny on their way up here with the food."

"Come on!" said Ron, rushing to the stairway. "Let's go teach that slimy git a lesson he'll never —"

"Calm down, mate," said Rick, raising both hands and stepping in front of Ron. "I'll take care of Malfoy – don't worry. You need to stay here. If Harry spots attackers, he'll fly straight back here to tell you. One of you come and get me, I won't be far away. Just go down these stairs, and then carry on straight along the corridor about a hundred feet – turn right at the end. I'll be just around the corner – OK?"

"OK! But hurry!" yelled Ron. "If that sneaky little ferret so much as —" But he stopped abruptly when he found himself talking to thin air. Rick had made himself invisible and Apparated to Hermione and Ginny.

“Well, well, well,” sneered Draco malevolently. “Now what shall I do with filthy little Miss Mudblood ... and Potty’s beloved Muggle-loving Weaslet?” Draco had ambushed them on their way to the West Tower with breakfast for the boys. The food lay scattered at their feet, along with their wands. They were pinned, spreadeagled, to the wall, with their arms and legs clamped in heavy manacles. It was the same spell Draco had used on Hermione in the dungeon many months before.

Hermione was glaring at Draco defiantly, but Ginny let out a gasp when he mentioned Harry.

“Oh, yes, Weasley ... I know all about you and your darling Scarface!” said Draco smugly. “If there’s one thing Pansy’s good at, it’s knowing whose doing what – and with whom. Pansy has her uses ... she keeps her ear close to the ground.”

“Hardly surprising ... since she lives in the gutter – with rabid little ferrets like you!” spat Hermione furiously.

“That will cost you Mudblood!” snarled Draco, pointing his wand at her. “We have some unfinished business from that night in the dungeon ... remember?” he said, threateningly, his face filled with hatred. “If I’m quick, I might just have time for some fun – before my Master’s Dark Creatures arrive ... to kill you ... along with the rest of the school,” he gloated, his hard grey eyes gleaming maliciously.

“But, it’s business before pleasure. I’m going to give you exactly one chance before I demonstrate the effectiveness of the Cruciatus Curse. Where are Potter and his stupid friends? When I saw you two leaving the Great Hall with that food, I checked the Gryffindor table – Potter, Weasley, and Godfrey weren’t there. You were taking that food to them. Now, where are they?!”

Hermione said nothing, raising her chin defiantly. Ginny turned her head, looking desperately down the corridor, praying that someone would come.

“Hoping someone will come to rescue you, little Weaslet?” jeered Draco. “Well, you better forget it. You see, that food,” he said,

pointing a finger at the food scattered on the ground, “is laced with a powerful drug. I used a special form of the Imperius Curse that works on house elves. I forced one of them to put a sleeping draft in the breakfast. Everyone but the three of us – plus Potter and his scummy little sidekicks – will have fallen into a deep sleep by now – a sleep from which they will never awaken....” he gloated evilly. “It’s just a little precaution my Master decided upon, to ensure there would be no resistance when his Dark Creatures come to destroy the school ... and kill everyone.”

Draco took a step closer to Hermione, pointing his wand at her chest. Then, turning to Ginny, with an evil grin on his face, he said, “I’m going to put your little Mudblood friend under the Cruciatus Curse, Weasley. And, I’m going to keep her under it until it destroys her precious little mind and turns her into a vegetable ... just like her dear Muggle mummy and daddy – unless you tell me where Potty and the other two are....”

“I can tell you where one of them is ... I’m right behind you,” said Rick, materialising out of thin air. Draco spun around to face Rick.

“Cruc —” began Draco, but stopped when he realised that his wand hand was empty.

“Lose something, Malfoy?” asked Rick, holding Draco’s wand in his left hand, before pocketing it. Draco’s surprise turned to shock when Rick pointed a finger in the direction of Hermione and Ginny, making their manacles disappear. He tried to turn and run, but Rick flicked his eyes towards Draco’s feet and they were suddenly stuck fast to the floor of the corridor. Desperately, he dug his hand into his robes. But before he could reach the object of his frantic search, Rick pointed a finger at him, and flicked it upwards. There was a tearing sound, and a shiny golden object was ripped from Draco’s robes and flew up in the air, hovering high above his head – well out of reach.

“A Portkey – so that’s how you were planning to escape ... before the slaughter begins,” said Rick, glancing at the golden ring and making it explode.

“No!” gasped Draco. “I-I’ve got to get out of here – they’ll be here any minute!” He said looking about wildly. Then turning fearfully to Rick – as if he was seeing him for the first time – he asked, “W-who are you? W-what are you? How come you can do all of this magic – without a wand?”

“I am your evil master’s nemesis ... and, I’m also the one who gave you a chance, once, to mend your ways ... but, unfortunately, you didn’t take it.”

“W-what are you talking about?” stammered Draco, frightened and confused.

“Have you forgotten the warning I gave you, the night I Squibbed your father?” asked Rick. “I told you that if you had any further dealings with Voldemort or his Death Eaters, I’d Squib you, too.”

The blood drained from Draco’s face as the penny dropped. “I-It’s you ... you’re the G-Ghost of Godric Gryffindor,” said Draco trembling with fear. “I-I’ll, change sides – p-please, let me join you, anything....” begged Draco pathetically.

“You’ve got a yellow streak a mile-wide,” spat Rick. “It’s too late now to switch sides. Anyway, it’s just a trick – I can read your evil, twisted little mind, Malfoy. You’ll never change your spots.”

“P-Please, p-please don’t Squib me – I’ll do anything you ask, I promise – p-please ... I’ll give you gold ... as much as you want ... just don’t Squib me ... please....” beseeched Draco pitifully.

“You’re wasting your time Draco – and mine,” said Rick. “I can read your mind – and believe me, it’s not a good read. I know you can’t be trusted ... you’ll be back at your evil master’s side the first chance you get. Sorry, but I can’t allow that. Squibbus!”

“No!” gasped Draco, collapsing to the ground. Since the soles of his feet were still stuck to the floor he was forced to sit. He pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them, whimpering pitifully.

“You’ll have to memory-charm him,” said Hermione, softly, moving away from Draco, as she pocketed her wand. “He knows too much.” Ginny was staring at Rick in shock, jaw hanging down. She had been amazed at the remarkable powers Rick had revealed during the Azkaban operation, but she’d never suspected for a moment that he was the mysterious ghost.

“I was planning on it,” said Rick. “I’ll make myself invisible, memory-charm him, then Apparate back to the West Tower. Tell him the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor came to rescue you ... and Squibbed him. Leave him stuck to the floor for now – that’ll keep him out of our way. The whole school will remain unconscious indefinitely, according to what I could glean from his fetid little mind. They’ve been given the Draught of the Living Death. Maybe you two should go down to the Great Hall and check that everyone’s alright. I’ll try to keep the attackers away from there, OK?”

“Ginny, will you go to the Great Hall?” asked Hermione, urgently. “I’m going straight to the library ... I’m sure I’ve read about an antidote to the Draught of the Living Death – Yes! I remember, now ... Wiggensweld potion! I need to find out how to make it! We’ll have to break into Snape’s stores to get the ingredients....”

“Good idea,” said Rick. “If you do succeed in brewing the antidote, you should probably revive Snape first. You’ll need his help to brew up enough of the antidote for the whole school ... and that way you can use him as a guinea pig,” said Rick with grin.

Hermione smiled nervously at Rick, then quickly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “Thanks for rescuing me ... again ... and good luck.” Rick smiled at her before vanishing, although Hermione could still feel him in her arms. She let him go and heard him say, “Obliviate.”

Malfoy suddenly lifted his head and stared about in confusion. “What happened?” he demanded, glaring at Ginny. “You and the Mudblood were chained to that wall ... how did you get free? And what have you done to my feet? I can’t move them. Where’s my wand?” he

demanded, as he rose, with difficulty, to his feet and searched his pockets frantically.

“You won’t be needing a wand, Malfoy ... ever again,” said Hermione harshly, approaching him.

“What do you mean?” snarled Draco, becoming frustrated and angry.

“Don’t you remember?” asked Hermione, cocking an eyebrow for dramatic effect. “The Ghost of Godric Gryffindor came to rescue us ... and Squibbed you. He said he’d warned you, that if you associated with Voldemort and his lackeys again, he’d Squib you ... and he did.”

“Squibbed me?” wailed Draco. “No! Not that! Not a loathsome Squib ... like my disgusting father. No! It’s too horrible – I’d rather be dead!”

“It’s too late, Malfoy,” said Hermione, unsympathetically. “But look on the bright side ... you may just get your death-wish granted – when your evil master’s Dark Creatures get here.”

“The Dark Creatures,” screamed Draco, in horror. “They’ll be here any minute!” He began ransacking his robes, frantically searching for the ring.

“Looking for your Portkey ring?” asked Ginny.

“Where is it?” begged Draco, staring anxiously at her. “I’ll give you a thousand galleons for it ... ten thousand ... please ... give it to me.”

“Too late, Malfoy,” said Ginny harshly. “The ghost destroyed it. You’re stuck here with the rest of us. In fact, you’re stuck right there – to the floor,” she said laughing.

“Come on Ginny,” said Hermione, “let’s not waste any more time with this pathetic excuse for a Squib, we’ve got work to do!”

“Are Hermione and Ginny OK?” asked Ron anxiously, when Rick reappeared on the West Tower.

“Yeah, fine,” said Rick. “Has Harry spotted any attackers yet?”

“No, he was just back a couple of minutes ago – I told him where you’d gone. He told me not to worry ... that you’d take care of Malfoy. So what did you do to the slimy git?”

“Squibbed him,” said Rick.

Ron’s face lit up with an enormous grin. “I can’t think of a more deserving git than Malfoy ... that curse was made for him.”

Rick proceeded to tell Ron how everyone in the school, but the five Gryffindors and Draco, were in a drugged sleep.

“First time in my life I’m glad I missed a meal,” said Ron grimly. “Hey – here comes Harry and it looks like he’s in a hurry....”

Harry approached the tower fast, stalling at the last moment to drop on the parapet, before jumping to the ground and transforming. “Giants ... about fifty of them,” said Harry hurriedly. “They’re in the Forbidden Forest uprooting trees. It looks like they’re planning to use them as clubs or battering rams to smash their way into the castle.”

“Yeah, makes sense,” said Ron. “They’ll have been sent in first, to breach the castle’s defences, so the other Dark Creatures can get inside. Harry, everyone but us three, Ginny, and Hermione have been drugged ... by Malfoy. They’re all asleep down in the Great Hall – Hermione and Ginny are trying to revive them. Dumbledore got Filch to lock and barricade all the castle’s entrances last night, but Malfoy might have reopened some of them. You should fly around the school and check that everything’s secured.”

“What about Malfoy, where’s he?” asked Harry.

“Squibbed, with his feet stuck to the floor,” said Rick grinning. “Harry, after you’ve checked everything’s locked up, start flying

reconnaissance again, and let Ron know if you spot anything – I'll come back here, when I get the chance, for news from you, OK?

“Right,” said Harry.

Look, here come the Giants ... it's time for action....” said Rick making himself invisible and Apparating to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, from where the Giants were beginning to emerge. Harry transformed into an eagle and flew off, leaving Ron alone, to watch the fearsome scene taking place at the edge of the forest.

The Giants were at least twenty feet tall, a truly awesome sight, as they came out from the forest, their enormous footsteps shaking the earth. Ron could feel the tremors in the tower. They were wildly brandishing their enormous tree-clubs, and bellowing blood-curdling cries, as they stomped ponderously towards the castle. Bloody hell! thought Ron. I sure hope Rick can stop them. If that lot make it to the castle, they'll do more than break in – they'll smash it to bits. Despite the gravity of the situation, he couldn't help but laugh at how utterly brainless the Giants were. Several of them had managed to clout their comrades with their wildly swinging clubs. Three of them were struggling, half-dazed to their feet, having been felled by their fellows. Upon rising unsteadily to his feet, one of them began staggering in a stupor towards the lake, instead of carrying on towards the castle.

As Ron looked anxiously towards the approaching mob, he noticed that, one by one, they were disappearing into thin air. But, upon closer inspection, he discovered that they were not, in fact, disappearing, but being transformed into tiny Pixies, no more than a few inches tall. The Pixies were alarmed to find themselves among the diminishing pack of Giants who, rather than puzzling over their dwindling numbers, began swinging their enormous clubs at the tiny pixies. Fortunately, Pixies are fast and nimble – and easily managed to pick their way through the Giants' enormous legs and dash off for the cover afforded by the Forbidden Forest.

Ron was really enjoying the show now. Soon all the Giants had been transformed to Pixies ... well – all but one. The dazed Giant who had stumbled off to the lake, had just fallen in, making an enormous splash. But suddenly he was gone ... and there was a large dolphin

swimming about in the lake, apparently having a lot of fun, as he leaped clear of the water before diving back in. Nice one, Rick! thought Ron. The Giant Squid will probably appreciate the company.

After the last of the Pixies had disappeared into the forest, there was an eerie silence. Ron noticed that Rick had once again resumed his falcon form and was flying along the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He flew back and forth for several minutes, before suddenly diving to the ground, and vanishing.

Ron stared nervously towards the edge of the forest. Whatever was about to emerge from its cover was not going to be pleasant ... of that he was sure. He didn't have long to wait. Voldemort, assuming the castle's defences were now breached, was sending in his terrifying creatures in waves, with a small gap between each wave to prevent them attacking each other, rather than their intended victims.

First to emerge from the trees were five fearsome Nundu. The gigantic leopard-like creatures are among the most dangerous beasts in existence. Ron shivered as the huge Nundu padded lithely, like giant cats, towards the castle. They were enormous; each one must have been at least fifteen feet long. Ron would have been even more terrified had he known they didn't even need to touch their prey to kill them – their breath alone caused fatal diseases and death. But they never got close enough to the castle to breathe on anyone. Suddenly they were gone, and in their place were five frolicking Kneazles.

Looking back towards the forest, Ron saw thirty Mountain Trolls, lumbering vaguely in the direction of the castle. Their progress was slowed by their enthusiasm for trying out their new clubs – on each other. Ron briefly turned his mind back to his first-year, when he and Harry had rescued Hermione from a Mountain Troll. This lot looked very similar: About twelve feet tall, with grey skin, ugly lumpy bodies, and flat horny feet. And depressingly stupid, recalled Ron. Rick won't need to worry too much about those morons ... most of them will have been brained by their mates before they get anywhere near the castle.

The next attackers to emerge from the forest were Manticores. There were seven of them ... and they were far more dangerous than the stupid pack of trolls. Ron gasped when he saw them. They had a

head like a human, a body like a lion, and the tail of a scorpion. Ron remembered from Hagrid's lessons that their tail was venomous, and its sting instantly fatal. He also remembered that their skin repels magical charms, just like a dragon's. Rick's going to have his work cut out transforming that lot, though Ron nervously. They probably have a weak spot somewhere, but it'll take him a while to find it ... and it could be difficult to get at.

Rick suddenly became visible, standing between the Mountain Trolls and the castle. "Oi! Over here you idiots!" he yelled to attract their attention. As they began chasing him with their awkward lumbering gait, Rick wheeled around in a wide arc, back towards the Forbidden Forest ... and the Manticores. When the approaching groups were about fifty feet apart, Rick disappeared.

Manticores are bad-tempered beasts at the best of times, and finding their direct path to the castle blocked by a bunch of imbecilic trolls, heading in the wrong direction, they began shouting at them with their very humanlike voices. Mountain Trolls may be stupid, but not so stupid that they don't know when they are being insulted. They set upon the Manticores with gusto, always up for a fight.

Ron had a great view of the battle. It looked like Rick was staying out of it and letting them finish each other off. The Mountain Trolls outnumbered the Manticores four-to-one, but the Manticores were much more dangerous, and far more intelligent than their huge foes. When the dust had finally settled, the trolls were all dead. They'd put up a ferocious struggle. Due to stupidity, rather than valour, it never occurred to them to turn tail and run as the Manticores began killing them all off with their fatal stings.

The Manticores, however, had not got off unscathed. They had taken quite a battering from the troll's enormous clubs. Three of them were dead, their vulnerable skulls smashed in, and the other four were stumbling about in a daze, bleeding from head-wounds. Rick took the opportunity to make his move. He discovered their magical protection was weakest around the eyes – and was especially weak in their injured state. Since they were badly wounded, Rick decided to try transforming them into some kind of lizard – as lizards possess the ability to recover quickly from injuries. It took quite a bit of effort, but

he eventually succeeded in transforming the four remaining Manticores into Mokes, a harmless shrinking lizard.

While Rick had been occupied with the Manticores, he had not been keeping an eye out for fresh attackers – but luckily, Harry had. He swooped down on Rick to get his attention, and then immediately headed off towards the castle. Rick looked up to see what appeared to be a black river, flowing towards the castle; but upon closer inspection, he realised it was not a river at all – but hundreds of Acromantulas, marching steadily towards the castle. In fact, the head of their orderly column had already reached it, and they were beginning to scale the outer walls. The enormous spiders were heading straight for the West Tower ... and Ron. They were on the march for food, it seemed – and Ron was the only food around.

Rick Apparated directly to the West Tower, where he found five Acromantulas fighting over Ron, who was lying, unconscious, on the ground. Rick immediately transformed the gigantic spiders into lovely red and black Ladybugs, who immediately took flight. He quickly leaned over the side of the tower and similarly transformed the Acromantulas who were scaling the castle walls. The others would keep a while ... he had to focus on Ron. While he was checking him over, Harry came in to land.

“How is he?” asked Harry with a worried voice. “Did they get him?”

“Yeah,” nodded Rick sadly. “He’s alive, but he’s been bitten in at least three places. I don’t have time to heal him now, while we’re under attack – anyway, Hermione’s much better than me.” He closed his eyes for a moment, and then opening them he looked at Ron and said: “Hibernatus. That should stop the poison progressing any further. Hermione’s down in Snape’s dungeon. Get him down to her as fast as you can – don’t forget to use a locking charm on the tower door ... and come straight back, mate, I need your help.”

Down in the Potions dungeon, Hermione and Ginny were working over five large cauldrons, while Snape was gathering additional ingredients. “You certainly made a mess of my stores, Miss Granger,”

he said acidly, “when you pillaged it for ingredients. How an incompetent student, such as yourself, managed to get the Wiggensweld potion correct the very first time, is quite beyond me ... it is notoriously difficult to brew correctly, and the slightest mistake renders it lethal.”

“Yes sir, I read that in the Potions Encyclopaedia in the library,” said Hermione, keeping her eyes fixed on the caldron she was stirring. “Err, that’s why we didn’t give it to anyone else, until we were sure ... err, that it —”

“Wasn’t lethal?” queried Snape, cocking an eyebrow at Hermione. “How touching that you should choose me as your guinea pig,” said Snape sarcastically.

“Oh, it seemed rather appropriate,” replied Hermione, with a touch of sarcasm. “As our Potions Master, you deserve much of the credit for our success – or otherwise – in brewing the potion. It seemed only fair that you should be the first to benefit from the fruits of labours, Professor.”

Snape snorted ... since the potion had worked, he could hardly criticise the blasted Know-It-All. “Weasley,” he said, “there is enough of your original brew for several more doses. Since I am still alive, we may safely conclude that it is not lethal. Go to the Great Hall and administer it to the Headmaster. You can also revive Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout – I can use their assistance in brewing more of the potion. Lean their heads back, and give them exactly thirteen drops each – is that understood?”

“Yes sir,” said Ginny, carefully grasping the small vial of turquoise-coloured Wiggensweld potion as she left the dungeon.

Snape moved along the line of cauldrons on which Hermione was working, and, finding no fault, nodded his head approvingly. “I must congratulate you, Miss Granger,” he said grudgingly. “It appears that you may have spent enough time in my classes actually paying attention to what I was saying, to learn something,” he said caustically.

Hermione was taken aback by Snape's backhanded compliment. In fact, she was stunned. In almost six years, he had never once made a positive comment – either to her, or about her.

But it was too good to last. Snape, immediately regretting his words added mockingly, "And I always thought you spent my entire class trying to think up clever things to say – to show off your book-knowledge."

Hermione fought to contain her anger – she was sorely tempted to tell Snape exactly what she thought of him – with no holds barred. But she kept her silence, concentrating on the job at hand, until she was distracted by a noise from the corridor. Suddenly, a stretcher, magically suspended by the Mobilicorpus spell, floated in through the open doorway. Ron was lying unconscious on the stretcher. Harry followed behind, guiding it into the dungeon. Hermione gasped.

"Potter! What is the meaning of this? Why are you and Mr. Weasley not down in the Great Hall with the rest of the school? In fact," he added, turning towards Hermione, "how is it that both you and Miss Weasley also managed to avoid getting drugged with the rest of the school?"

"I'll explain it all in a minute, sir," said Harry, turning to Hermione and ignoring Snape. "He's been bitten by Acromantulas, Hermione. Rick put a Hibernatus spell on him to temporarily stop the poison spreading. Can you heal him?" he asked, in a worried voice.

Hermione manoeuvred Ron onto Snape's desk, brushing aside several scrolls and a book, which fell to the floor. "Finite Incantatum," she said. Ron immediately began to groan and gasp for air, although his eyes remained closed. There were large, bleeding puncture marks on an arm and leg where the giant spiders had bitten him.

"What on earth do you think you are playing at, Miss —"

"She's a Healer," said Harry simply, stepping in front of Snape to prevent him interfering. "Hermione healed Ron a week ago in the

hospital wing when everyone – including you – was sure he was going to die.”

“Indeed?” said Snape, in stunned disbelief. He was still completely mystified as to how Weasley had recovered from what were undoubtedly fatal injuries on that occasion. There was such a look of absolute certainty and conviction in Potter’s eyes, that, completely against his instincts, Snape decided to give them the benefit of the doubt – for now. Weasley’s situation was dire. From what he had read on the subject of Acromantula venom, there was absolutely no hope of recovery anyway, so there was nothing lost in humouring them – apart from his dignity – and a great many house points – but that could wait until later.

“This all sounds very far-fetched,” said Snape, with undisguised incredulity. “But if you really believe you are able to heal him, Miss Granger, I suggest you start with the kidneys, liver, pancreas and brain. Those are the first organs to be destroyed by Acromantula venom. I will prepare a potion that will neutralise what venom remains in his blood ... although I doubt he will live long enough to benefit from it.”

Hermione began moving her hands in circles above the organs Snape had mentioned. A soft white light seemed to glow from her hands, flowing from the palms into Ron’s body. When Snape returned several minutes later with the anti-venom potion, he was utterly stunned at the sight of Hermione, her hands glowing as she moved them around Ron’s head. The strange light from her hands seemed to flow into him. Ron’s eyes slowly opened as he regained consciousness. “Bloody hell! Bloody great spiders!” he wailed, his face contorted in terror.

But before he could say anything further, Snape pointed his wand at Ron, bringing him up to a half-sitting position and lifted a vial of bright purple liquid to his lips. “Drink this, Weasley,” he ordered. “All of it. It contains a mild tranquillizer which should help to ease the horror of the attack.” Hermione, meanwhile, had waved her hands across the three vicious puncture marks where Ron had been bitten on his arm and leg, instantly healing them.

Snape regarded her with a look which was an incongruous mixture of disbelief, suspicion, awe ... and apprehension. "Lie still, Mr. Weasley," he said, magically lowering Ron to a reclining position. He proceeded to examine Ron carefully for several minutes. Snape then turned towards Hermione, gazing intently at her with an inscrutable expression on his face, which gave nothing away. Then turning back to Ron he said, "You appear to be completely healed, Mr. Weasley, I can find nothing wrong with you at all. Kindly remove yourself from my desk!"

When Ron had awkwardly up from his desk, Snape pointed his wand at it saying, "Scourgify!" in a distasteful tone, as if its sanctity had somehow been violated. He waved his wand at the scrolls and other items which Hermione had knocked to the floor in her haste to make room for Ron. They floated back onto the desk, and with final flick of his wand, Snape restored the contents of his desk to their correct place.

Turning on Ron and Hermione, he glared at them with piercing eyes. "Now, Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, perhaps one of you would care tell me what on earth is going on? Potter has sneaked away on me, I see. I believe he mentioned Mr. Godfrey's name, also. That makes five Gryffindors, who, alone, out of the whole school, managed to avoid being drugged with the Draught of the Living Death. It is very hard not to conclude that the five of you were responsible."

"It was Draco Malfoy," said Hermione. "Not us."

"Oh ... really ..." said Snape in patent disbelief. "This will, of course, mean immediate expulsion from Hogwarts, for all five of you ... regardless of what mysterious powers you – and Mr. Godfrey – may possess, Miss Granger."

"But it wasn't us!" yelled Ron angrily. "You slim —"

"Ron, no!" interrupted Hermione, before he could tell Snape exactly what he thought of him. "Err ... shouldn't we be working on the Wiggensweld potion, Professor?" asked Hermione, moving back to one of the cauldrons. "I'm sure this can all be sorted out later. If we don't stir these cauldrons the potion will be ruined."

Snape glared at her through narrowed eyes. "I am quite capable of managing to brew Wiggensweld potion without your instructions, you insufferable know-it-all," spat Snape derisively. However, he quickly began checking the cauldrons and stirring them vigorously. When he was satisfied with them he looked up, to discover that Ron had snuck away from the dungeon while his back was turned. "Where has Mr. Weasley gone?" demanded Snape angrily.

Hermione knew perfectly well that he'd gone back to the West Tower to help Rick and Harry, but she just shrugged her shoulders silently.

"Until the Headmaster formally expels you, you are still a student at this school, Miss Granger," Snape said in his haughtiest voice. "You are required to obey me. Now, where are Godfrey, Potter – and Weasley, and what are they up to?"

At that very moment, the Headmaster walked into the dungeon, smiling serenely.

"Ah, Severus, do forgive me ... I've been sleeping on the job again ... I fear," he said with a playful smile. "But, the excellent potion brewed by Misses Granger and Weasley has revived me wonderfully. Am I correct in believing that Wiggensweld potion is extremely difficult to brew? I consider their success a testament to the outstanding teaching abilities of their Potions Master," he added, smiling warmly at Snape.

"Thank you, Headmaster," said Snape emotionlessly. "Indeed, it is an exceptionally difficult potion to brew. It is also highly dangerous – the slightest mistake and it is absolutely lethal. Miss Granger and Miss Weasley took the precaution of testing it on me first, before administering it further."

Dumbledore snorted as he suppressed a laugh, but his blue eyes were twinkling merrily. "Now, now, Severus, Miss Granger has, I believe, been top of your Potions class – and all her other classes, for that matter – for the past five years. I am sure you were in no danger. How many house points should we award to Gryffindor for their excellent potion?"

“Award?” hissed Snape incredulously, almost choking on the words. “But Headmaster ... Miss Granger and Miss Weasley – along with Mr. Potter, Mr. Godfry, and Mr. Weasley – are the only ones in the whole school who were not drugged. Surely it is obvious that it must have been they who perpetrated this extremely dangerous and foolhardy prank. I would have expected you to deduct house points – not award them ... and to expel all five of them immediately....”

“Ah, but it was not they who put the sleeping draft in the breakfast, Severus. It was Draco Malfoy. He was acting under orders from Voldemort, whose Dark Creatures are, at this very moment, attacking the school.”

Snape looked completely horrified. “But Headmaster ... what is being done to repel the attackers and protect the school?”

Dumbledore smiled at Snape. “Now, Severus, you know very well I have my reasons for keeping secrets from you. You will just have to trust me when I say that our defenders have more than the measure of Voldemort’s foul creatures ... you may rely upon it.”

“Godfry, Potter, and Weasley?” asked Snape in disbelief.

Dumbledore just smiled, silently.

“Heaven help us,” muttered Snape under his breath.

“I see you and Miss Granger are brewing up a large batch of the Wiggenweld potion, Severus. Could you use any further assistance?”

“Yes, Headmaster, but only from Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout,” replied Snape. “I certainly wouldn’t trust any students with such a difficult – and potentially deadly – potion.”

“Except for Miss Granger, perhaps?” asked the Headmaster innocently.

Snape glared at Hermione. "In view of the seriousness of the situation, Miss Granger may continue to render her assistance," muttered Snape ungraciously.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Chapter 32 - Lady Firebird and Muldorian

After sneaking away from the Potions dungeon while Professor Snape was occupied with the cauldrons of Wiggensweld potion, Ron rushed straight back to the West Tower. He was dreading finding more Acromantulas there, and breathed an enormous sigh of relief at finding the nightmare monsters from hell were gone. Rick had disposed of them all.

Ron immediately scanned the edge of the Forbidden Forest, from where the waves of attackers had come. Voldemort's Spatial Portal must be somewhere in the forest, thought Ron as he searched, unsuccessfully, for Rick and Harry. Fortunately, there was no sign of any Dark Creatures either.

Ron walked slowly around the parapet, scanning the horizon until he was facing in the opposite direction from the Forbidden Forest – towards the Quidditch field. What he saw there made his blood run cold. Harry was flying over the Quidditch stands on his Firebolt – which they had brought to the tower along with Ron's broom and another for Rick – just in case they were needed. The source of Ron's fright was Harry's pursuers. He was certain they were Vampires, hundreds of them ... all chasing after Harry.

Ron was puzzled. Why doesn't he fly faster? Harry can fly heaps faster than that ... he shouldn't have any trouble getting away from those Vampires. Why isn't he using his Quidditch skills to soar and dive, and evade them? Hell, why doesn't he just transform into an Eagle? I hope he hasn't been bitten, thought Ron, becoming worried.

But then he noticed something very strange. The closest things to Harry weren't Vampires at all ... they were bats. Then he noticed that the bats, unlike the vampires, didn't seem to be interested in Harry ... they were turning away from him and flying towards the castle. Bloody hell! thought Ron. Vampires can change into bats; that's what they're doing, they're changing into bats and when they get to the castle, they'll change back into Vampires – and attack! What the hell am I supposed to do now? he asked himself, reaching for his broom in a panic.

But before he could fly off, Ron realised – with great relief – that the approaching bats were not making for the castle ... they were going to fly right past it. In fact, they kept going until they reached the Forbidden Forest. Ron looked back at Harry. There was still a constant stream of bats coming from his direction and heading for the forest. Ron scratched his head, puzzled, as he noticed that the number of vampires chasing Harry was becoming smaller.

Suddenly Ron slapped himself hard on the forehead, as he realised what was really happening. Bloody brilliant! he muttered to himself. Rick's made himself invisible and he's riding on the back of Harry's broom. Vampires are intelligent creatures – they know who Harry Potter is – and they're going for him. Harry's deliberately letting them keep up with him, to allow Rick to transform them into bats!

The bats, having no interest in wizards on broomsticks, were heading for the forest. Probably going off for a good day's kip, thought Ron, laughing. The remaining Vampires were puzzled, no doubt, as to why their fellows were changing themselves into bats; but since it was something they did naturally, it didn't occur to them that they were actually being transformed by Rick – permanently.

When the last Vampire had been transformed, Harry flew back to the West Tower on his Firebolt. Rick, who was also on the broom, made himself visible, and looked apologetically at Ron. "I'm really sorry about those Acromantulas, mate ... I was so busy dealing with the Manticores that I didn't spot them until it was too late – and they'd climbed up here ... and got to you. It must have been horrible —"

"Bloody hell! I never want to experience anything like that again – as long as I live! It was worse than the time we escaped from a whole herd of the bleeding monsters in Dad's Ford Anglia," said Ron, turning to Harry. "When I saw them coming up the tower, I was petrified ... my brain stopped working ... it was my absolute worst nightmare come true! Instead of jumping on my broom and flying away, or getting down from the tower and bolting the door behind me, I just stood there – frozen with fear. You have no idea how bloody huge those things look when they're on top of you ... and grab you with those massive pincers of theirs, and bite —" But Ron couldn't go on, he was shaking too much from the terrible memories. His face

had gone as white as a sheet – his freckles standing out in stark contrast.

Harry put an arm around Ron's shoulder. "You poor bugger," he said sympathetically. "Try not to think about it, mate... Err, so did Hermione fix you up OK?"

"Yeah, she's bloody amazing... But, you're right, I have to stop thinking about those..." said Ron determinedly. Then turning his mind back to what he had just witnessed, he said. "Hey, that was a really neat trick you two pulled on those Vampires ... it took me a while to figure out what was going on. What the hell were those Vampires doing out in daytime? I always thought they only came out at night."

"Yeah, met too," said Harry. "I suppose Voldemort found some dark magic that allows them to get about in daylight."

"Well that lot will be strictly nocturnal from now on ... now that they're bats," said Rick.

"Right," laughed Ron. "So what else has attacked since those horrible bloody gigantic —" he said, shuddering once again at the memory of the Acromantulas.

"Quintapedes," said Rick quickly, attempting to distract Ron from the giant spiders. "There were about fifty of them, but they weren't much trouble, I transformed them into Bowtruckles. They all rushed off to the Forbidden Forest to find themselves a tree. After that, came a whole bunch of Banshees ... uh ... they were ghastly," he said with a shudder.

While Rick was talking, Harry had transformed into an eagle and flown off on another surveillance mission.

"So what did you do about the Banshees?" asked Ron. "Was their screaming as dreadful as they say?"

"Harry had just come back up here from the Potions dungeon," answered Rick. "I put a Deafening Spell on both of us, to protect us from their screaming, so I don't really know what they sounded like. I

Apparated over to where they'd come out from the forest and transformed the lot of them into a lovely flock of Jobberknolls."

"Good one!" said Ron enthusiastically. "Remind me not to go walking in the Forbidden Forest on the day any of those Jobberknolls die. Their death screams aren't lethal – like Banshees – but they're meant to be bloody awful just the same."

"I wonder if that's it," mused Rick. "I sure hope so ... what else could Voldemort have left to throw at us?"

"I can't think of anything, mate," replied Ron. "It's not full moon, so there won't be werewolves ... fortunately. Since we've disposed of the Dementors, what else could the evil bastard have left?"

"It looks like we're about to find out," said Rick, pointing towards Harry who was approaching fast.

"Yeah, I think you're right," replied Ron, his eyes fixed upon the fast-moving eagle, as it dived towards them. "Something sure as hell has put the wind up Harry!"

Harry transformed instantly. "Dragons!" he exclaimed, as he struggled to catch his breath. "They're still over the Forbidden Forest, I didn't hang about to count them, after I realised what they were – but there must be dozens of them."

"Hang on," said Rick. "Dragons aren't Dark Creatures, are they?"

"No, definitely not," said Ron. "But Charlie said one time that there are spells a rider can use to control a dragon. They'll have Death Eaters riding them ... Bloody hell, this is bad ... it won't take long for a bunch of dragons to set the school ablaze and destroy it!"

"How about we do the same thing as we did with the Vampires?" suggested Harry. "You won't be able to transform the dragons – they're too well protected from magic – but if I fly you about on the back of my broom, you could Squib their riders."

“No,” said Rick, shaking his head. “We’d both be incinerated before I could Squib even a few of the Death Eaters.”

“So what can we do?” asked Ron, desperately. “Look! Here they come!”

“I’m going to transform into my Norwegian Ridgeback Animagus form,” said Rick. “Maybe I can convince the dragons to revolt against their riders. You two better get down from here ... before you get barbequed. Go warn Dumbledore and try to get everyone who’s been revived down to the dungeons – in case I can’t stop them.” Harry and Ron nodded and were quickly gone.

Rick carefully balanced himself on the parapet, before transforming into an enormous Norwegian Ridgeback. He unfurled his gigantic wings and leaning forward, pushed off with his feet. He was soon airborne, and flying directly towards the approaching dragons. There were about thirty of the enormous beasts. Many of them appeared to be Common Welsh Greens, but there were also Hungarian Horntails, Romanian Longhorns, Swedish Short-Snouts and a handful of Norwegian Ridgebacks. They were flying in ‘V’ formation and the leader was a Norwegian Ridgeback, somewhat smaller than Rick.

As Rick approached the lead dragon, he made a conciliatory gesture with his head to demonstrate his peaceful intentions. The lead dragon returned the gesture as Rick turned to fly along side of it. “Greetings, oh mighty one,” said the dragon deferentially, obviously impressed with Rick’s superior size.

“Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?” asked Rick politely.

“I am called Lady Firebird,” she said with great dignity. “And how, may I ask, are you called?”

“Err ... I don’t really have a name,” said Rick, awkwardly.

“How very curious,” replied Lady Firebird. “But you must have a name. Allow me to give you one.” She examined Rick closely from his fiery snout to his formidable tail. Finally she spoke. “You shall be known

henceforth as Muldorion the Magnificent ... because you are, indeed, a truly magnificent beast."

"Thank you, madam," said Rick gallantly, in what seemed intuitively to be the correct form of speech for the occasion.

"Do you have a nesting mate, my magnificent one?" asked Lady Firebird, as small wisps of flame escaped her mouth, betraying her keen interest.

"Err ... no, madam," replied Rick, uneasily, as he became aware of the amorous feelings Lady Firebird was developing towards him. "Err, you see ... I am not just a dragon, Lady Firebird. I am many other things: A bird, a wizard, and many more things, besides."

"How remarkable," she replied. "So really, you are wizard, who can change into many shapes, including that of a magnificent dragon. Is that correct?" she asked, with a trace of disappointment in her voice.

"Yes, my Lady," replied Rick, "it is correct." After a few moments of awkward silence, he decided to get to the point. "My noble Lady Firebird, I have come to request your aid ... to help save my friends, who are in the castle which lies before us."

"I would gladly help you, my splendid one, but we Dragons are not free to act as we choose. Each one of us has upon our back a rider. They are wizards who use their magic to bend us to their will. We do not wish to kill and destroy, but we are forced to, by these evil ones."

"Can you not resist them?" asked Rick, as Lady Firebird suddenly veered away from him. Her rider had been furiously flinging spells at Rick for the past few minutes, but they rebounded harmlessly from his thick magical scales. Rick turned to catch up with Lady Firebird.

"That was my rider ... he forced me to fly away from you," she said apologetically. "In answer to your question; No, it is not possible for us to disobey our rider. The wicked magic they use causes us enormous pain if we do not obey. I am struggling against such pain, even now, as we speak, for my rider is trying to keep me away from

you. It cannot be resisted for long,” she said hastily, before veering violently away from Rick, once more.

Rick quickly caught her up again. “I entreat you ... please listen to me my Lady! I have an idea that will save my friends, and also free you and you and your fellow dragons from the evil ones who enslave you. I shall turn back into a wizard and destroy the magic of the evil one who rides upon your back. I shall then take his place in your saddle. I wish you to fly alongside each of your friends in turn, so I may destroy the magic of their riders. It may take some time to get all the riders, so please ask your friends not to attack the castle while I am working, even though their riders may cause them great pain. When I am finished, you will all be free. I hope you will be merciful to your riders and not kill them. They will be rendered harmless.”

“I shall do as you ask,” replied Lady Firebird. “If you can do all you promise, you are well named, my Muldorian ... my magnificent one! Adieu!”

Rick changed into a falcon and dived beneath Lady Firebird, coming up behind her and landing on her back a few feet behind her unsuspecting rider. He then changed back to himself, quickly grabbing hold of a harness strap to prevent being thrown off the dragon’s undulating back. He made himself invisible before intoning, “Squibbus.” The astonished Death Eater turned when he heard the dreaded word, but he saw no one. He found himself being lifted magically out of his saddle and the next moment he was tightly bound and securely strapped to the harness, some feet behind the saddle.

Lady Firebird felt an exhilarating sense of freedom, the moment Rick Squibbed her rider. It was intoxicating, and she wanted to soar through the sky in celebration ... but then she remembered her promise to Muldorian, who even now, was riding on her back in his wizard form. She commanded the other dragons not to attack the castle, promising them they would soon be free to fly where they wished. Beginning with those closest to the castle, she flew alongside her fellow dragons, one by one. She knew as soon as their riders had been neutralised, because the beasts flew off in joyful abandon at their new-found freedom.

When he had Squibbed the last dragon-rider, Rick freed himself from the dragon saddle and transformed into a falcon. He flew to Lady Firebird's head where he changed back into a dragon.

"Thank you Lady Firebird," said Rick. "You were wonderful! You have helped me save the school and all my friends ... I shall be eternally grateful to you, my Lady. But now I must go, in case any further attackers should come."

"There are no more," replied Lady Firebird. "We were the last. I am glad to have been able to help you, my magnificent one; but in truth, there is no way to repay you for giving us our freedom... Perhaps, one day, you might come in your dragon form to visit me. I can be found at the place known as the Hanging Valley of Fire in the autumn – during mating season. Fare thee well, my Muldorian ... my magnificent one," she said, with a large tear in her eye, as she turned and flew away.

By the time the students and the remaining staff had been revived by the vast quantities of antidote brewed up by Snape and his helpers, the dragons were gone and the battle was over. The only evidence left of the attack of the Dark Creatures were the bodies of the dead Mountain Trolls and Manticores lying near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid got together a party to dispose of them.

Professor Dumbledore considered it a stroke of luck that almost the entire school had been unconscious and had not witnessed the attack. Only Professors Snape and Sprout, plus Madam Pomfrey, who had been revived by Hermione and Ginny's potion, knew that Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Rick Godfrey were the ones who fought off the attackers.

Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey naturally assumed that Harry Potter had been the main actor in the school's defence. It was an assumption that Dumbledore was happy to tacitly encourage. He was well aware of Snape's suspicions regarding Rick Godfrey – but he could be trusted to remain silent. None of them knew the particulars of how the attackers had been defeated, and would be as surprised as everyone else when a variety of new and unusual species were discovered inhabiting the Forbidden Forest – not to mention the Giant Squid's new playmate – a very large happy dolphin who had

mysteriously taken up residence in the lake. It was assumed that, with the exception of the slain Mountain Trolls and Manticores, the attackers had simply fled. Dumbledore gave them no further information and asked them to keep what they knew about the attack to themselves. He wanted to keep Rick's powers a secret – if possible.

At the evening meal that night, the Headmaster gave a carefully abridged account of the day's events. "Draco Malfoy, who, incidentally, is no longer a student at this school, forced one of the house elves to adulterate all the dishes and beverages of this morning's breakfast with the Draught of the Living Death, rendering the whole school, with the exception of five students, unconscious. We all owe a great debt to the bravery, initiative, and intelligence of those students. They are Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, Rick Godfry, and Ginny Weasley."

All heads turned to the Gryffindor table and the five of them, who were seated together.

"This was an attempt – and very nearly a successful one – by Voldemort to destroy Hogwarts and kill all the students and staff," said Dumbledore. Most of the students gasped when he spoke the dreaded name, and his last comment about killing everyone evoked a shocked buzz of chatter from the four long tables.

Silencing the students with a wave of his hand, Dumbledore continued. "While the whole school was drugged, Voldemort sent in his legions of Dark Creatures. However, by great good fortune, the previously-mentioned students missed breakfast this morning. They bravely fought off the attackers and succeeded in the extraordinarily difficult task of brewing an antidote to the Draught of the Living Death. This was used to revive myself, and several colleagues, including Professor Snape, who supervised the production of a large enough quantity of the potion to awaken the entire school."

"I have no doubt that you will all be most eager for further details of the attack and how it was thwarted. But, I must request you, most forcefully, not to prevail upon those who were involved for such information. For anyone who was not already aware that we are

involved in a deadly war against the forces of Evil, today's events should leave you in no doubt, whatsoever. The exact manner in which today's attack was repulsed, involved magic which, in the context of the war, I wish to remain secret."

Dumbledore continued, "In recognition of their great deed, in saving the school, and the lives of us all, I award five hundred points to Gryffindor —" The Headmaster had to pause for a few moments to wait for the excited yells and loud cheering which erupted from the Gryffindor table to subside. "I would ask the five students to stand, and allow us to all acknowledge their great feat, and to offer them our heartfelt thanks," said Dumbledore.

Harry, Hermione, Ron, Rick, and Ginny rose self-consciously to their feet, looking up towards the head table and Professor Dumbledore, who, beaming at them, began clapping enthusiastically. The whole school joined in, making an enormous din, the likes of which had not been heard in the Great Hall for many years.

The final school term got under way, and life at Hogwarts resumed its normal rhythm. The students who had not returned after the Easter break, were soon back at school. Their parents having provided them with notes claiming illness, extenuating family circumstances of various sorts, missing the train, and a host of other lame excuses for why their children had not returned at the appointed time. Professor Dumbledore welcomed them back, without comment. Many of the students would not have known the real reason their parents had kept them back, and the Headmaster was not going to condemn the children for the sins of their parents.

One Saturday afternoon late in May, Harry, Hermione, Rick, and Ron were sitting around a table in the Gryffindor common room. Hermione, as usual, had books piled up all around her as she worked her way through her revision program for the final exams.

"I don't know why you're starting to study already, Hermione," complained Ron. "I mean the sixth-year exams are ages away ... and they're no big deal anyway. It's not like the OWLS in fifth-year or the NEWTS next year," said Ron. "They don't really count ... so why bother?"

“Ron,” said Hermione, looking up – clearly irritated at being distracted from her studies, “you have to pass every subject in sixth-year that you want to study in seventh-year for your NEWTS ... remember?”

“Really?” asked Ron surprised. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, really!” replied Hermione in an exasperated tone. “I don’t know how many times I’ve told you this year ... but you keep conveniently forgetting it. The exams are only a weeks away; I suggest you start on the revision program I drew up for you at the start of the term ... if you want to pass, that is. And the same goes for you Harry,” she said sternly, turning to Harry who was thumbing casually through at an old Quidditch magazine. Then, turning to Rick, Hermione narrowed her eyes and sounding distinctly annoyed, added, “Some of us actually have to study for our exams.”

“Come on, Hermione, loosen up a bit,” said Rick in a conciliatory tone. “You know perfectly well you’ll pass everything with flying colours.”

“Well, I want to do better than pass all my subjects,” replied Hermione, piqued, “I intend to...” But she stopped, and glared at Rick once more before quickly turning back to the book lying open on the table in front of her – with cheeks burning bright red, and muttering unfair and cheat under her breath. As they drew closer to the exams, Hermione was getting more and more stressed at the prospect that she would not have the highest overall mark for their year. She had always been dux of her year at Hogwarts – and her Muggle primary school, for that matter, as well. But Hermione was growing increasingly fearful that Rick was about to usurp her title – without making the slightest effort. She knew it wasn’t his fault – and she loved him dearly – but it made her absolutely furious just the same – it was all so unfair.

Harry, Ron, and Rick moved down to the other end of the table, leaving Hermione to study in peace – and hoping she would leave them to not study in peace. “You know, the problem,” said Harry softly, “is that I really find it hard to take my studies seriously and worry about them, while Voldemort’s still out there. He may have lost his Dark Creatures and a lot of his Death Eaters, but he’s still got plenty more ... not to mention all his evil powers. I hate this waiting ...

always waiting for him to strike, waiting to see what he's going to do next," said Harry tensely.

"I wish we could find out where he is and take the fight to him," said Ron. "We're always on the bloody defensive, waiting for him to call the shots and make the first move. If we could find him, we could attack him on our terms ... and finish the evil bastard off."

"According to Dumbledore, the Order doesn't have a clue where he is," replied Rick. "They think he keeps moving about. When he summons his followers, using their Dark Mark, they have no idea where they're going. They use some sort of Apparition-like spell, which takes them to Voldemort – to wherever he is at that moment. It's a different place each time."

"What about drawing him into a trap?" suggested Ron.

"I don't think it'd work, mate," replied Harry. "He's completely paranoid ... remember. He'd immediately suspect something ... he'd never come."

The others nodded in agreement, and the three boys fell into silence for a few minutes.

"Hey, has any one seen Ginny?" asked Harry, after scanning the common room for her distinctive fiery red head.

Rick and Ron shook their heads.

"Ginny's Herbology class is doing a project on the Flutterby Bush," said Harry. "They have to prune them every day. Ginny said she was going to prune hers after lunch. I might just wander down to the greenhouses and see if she's still there."

"You sure you're not sneaking off for a snog?" demanded Ron, suspiciously.

"Ron, mate," said Harry, with an exasperated sigh. "I am not going off for a snog. But if I was – so what? Ginny's my girlfriend, and you know it. So just get over it, will you? Hey, I know ... why don't you go

find Padma, and take her for a walk ... or whatever ... and leave me and Ginny alone.”

“No chance there, mate,” complained Ron. “I should have known better than getting myself a girlfriend in Ravenclaw. Padma’s almost as bad as Hermione! She’s damn-well revising for the exams as well. What is it with these witches?”

Harry laughed as he set off to find Ginny.

“You ought to get Hermione to do Padma one of her revision schedules,” said Rick with a grin. “I’ve got a half-hour slot scheduled everyday in Hermione’s timetable ... until the week before the exams start.”

“You poor bugger,” snorted Ron, with a smirk. “Padma’s not quite as organised – or stingy – as Hermione. I get a bit more quality time than that. Boy, Hermione’s sure got you on thin rations, mate,” laughed Ron loudly.

“What’s that?” asked Hermione, looking up quizzically from her work. “What’s all this about rations?”

“Err ... nothing, Hermione,” said Rick innocently. Bloody Ron, he can never keep his voice down, he thought to himself.

Hermione normally would have pursued the point – she hated it when something was going on which she didn’t know about – but she had too much work to do to bother with Rick and Ron and their silly juvenile jokes today. Hermione returned to her work, and the two boys continued chatting quietly at the other end of the table, until Harry returned ten minutes later.

“Find Ginny?” asked Ron.

“Err, no,” replied Harry, sounding a little uneasy. “Professor Sprout was down at the greenhouses and said Ginny hasn’t been down there today. I wonder where she could have got to... I know, I’ll check for her on the Marauders’ Map,” he said, turning towards the stairs that led up to their dormitory.

“Wait up a bit, mate,” said Rick, closing his eyes and projecting a map of the castle in his mind. After scanning it carefully for a minute, he opened his eyes and spoke in a worried tone. “I don’t like this at all ... I can’t see Ginny anywhere ... she’s not at Hogwarts...”

“Are you certain?” asked Hermione, nervously. Rick’s serious tone had cut through her concentration and her studies were forgotten.

“Absolutely certain,” confirmed Rick apprehensively.

“Voldemort’s got her!” said Harry in a thick voice, his face white with fear. “He’s taken her, just like he took Hermione at Christmas – to get me...”

Rick stood up and placed a reassuring hand on Harry’s shoulder. “We don’t know for sure that he’s got her. But if he has, we’ll get her back, mate – just like we got Hermione back. I’m going to Dumbledore, to tell him what’s happened.” Then looking Harry directly in the eye, he added. “If it is Voldemort who’s taken her, we all know why – we all know who he’s really after. Use your head this time, Harry, and don’t go rushing off into the evil bastard’s traps – and giving him what he wants. It won’t save Ginny ... but it will lose ... everything.”

Rick had cast an Imperturbable Charm around them, as well as his Wizard Repelling Charm, as soon as he’d realised Ginny was missing. He didn’t want the whole common room to know about it. He looked meaningfully at Hermione and then Ron. Distressed as they were, they both understood his meaning. Keep an eye on Harry – don’t let him out of your sight! Checking that Dumbledore was alone, Rick Apparated directly to the Headmaster’s office.

Professor Dumbledore sat back in his chair behind his immense desk. His aged face was etched with lines of worry; his blue eyes were not sparkling now – they were clouded with concern. Rick, who was standing anxiously before the Headmaster’s desk, had just informed him of Ginny’s disappearance.

“How do you think he could have got her?” asked Rick nervously. “Could one of the Death Eaters’ children have got a Portkey into the school?”

"No," sighed Dumbledore. "It is not possible to get a Portkey past the school wards. In Harry's fourth-year, Barty Crouch Junior created a Portkey out of the Triwizard Cup, but he was already within the wards when he did it. Creating a Portkey is quite advanced magic. Draco Malfoy, apparently, was capable of it, as he made the Portkey ring to escape the attack of the Dark Creatures. Mr. Malfoy was a powerful wizard – but as he is no longer a wizard and no longer at Hogwarts, I think it unlikely that any of the remaining students who could conceivably have been party to Miss Weasley's presumed abduction are capable of creating a Portkey. In retrospect, it was perhaps unwise of me to have allowed the Death Eaters' children to return, after their failure to come back after the Easter break," he added with regret.

"But that would have been unfair to the innocent ones sir," offered Rick.

"Yes, indeed Rick, it would," replied Dumbledore, shaking his head unhappily. "One must always be careful when attempting to thwart or punish the guilty – not to harm the innocent – or those who may be innocent." The Headmaster was lost in thought for a minute or two before speaking again. "The fifth-year Gryffindors take Herbology with Slytherin. Everyone in her class would have known Miss Weasley would be visiting the greenhouses. She was probably ambushed and stunned before reaching them; placed under an invisibility cloak and removed from the Hogwarts grounds, to where she could have been Apparated or Portkeyed away ... to anywhere," said Dumbledore gloomily.

"Pansy Parkinson has an invisibility cloak – or at least access to one," said Rick, remembering how she had abducted Hermione from her dormitory in the first term.

"Yes, and she may well have played some part in this affair," agreed Dumbledore. "However, now is not the time to concern ourselves with the minor accomplices. I am certain they will not have the slightest idea as to where Miss Weasley has been taken. Voldemort has obviously been made aware of the secret relationship between Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter. That he has taken her to lure Harry to his

death ... is certain. We must prevent Harry falling into his hands at all costs.”

“Hermione and Ron are keeping an eye on him sir; they are both aware of the situation. Perhaps I should go join them.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Dumbledore. “Harry will be in a very disturbed state, and, no doubt, blaming himself for what has happened to Miss Weasley. Voldemort has, in the past, shown himself to be most adept at manipulating Harry’s emotions. I want you to stay as close to Harry as possible – don’t let him out of your sight. It will be my sad duty to report Miss Weasley’s disappearance to her parents. It is not something, I am looking —”

But he was cut off at that moment by the sound of someone yelling from outside the office. “Ron!” said Rick having closed his eyes for a moment.

Dumbledore made a motion with his hand, to push aside the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to his office below, allowing Ron entry. Ron burst into the office, gasping for breath, he’d obviously run flat out, all the way from Gryffindor Tower.

“Harry’s gone!” he cried.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Coming up: Chapter 33 – End Game

Chapter 33 - End Game

Ron sat in the large chair in the Headmaster's office into which he had collapsed after his desperate sprint to deliver the terrible news... that Harry was gone. He was bent forward, holding his head in his hands struggling to catch his breath. Both Professor Dumbledore and Rick stared at him, as they waited impatiently, with a sense of deep foreboding, for further information about Harry. Just as Ron was about to speak, Hermione rushed into the room. She had started out from the Gryffindor common room at the same time as Ron; but not being so athletic, it had taken her longer to reach the Headmaster's office. She was crying and visibly distressed.

Rick gently drew her down to a large black couch in front of Dumbledore's desk. He put a comforting arm around her as she buried her head in his shoulder; the tears continuing to stream from her eyes.

"A few minutes after Rick left the common room, an owl flew in through the window with a message for Harry," said Ron, regaining his breath and sounding very distressed. "As soon as he read it, he turned his face from us so we couldn't see his reaction and said, 'I think I know where Ginny is – I'm going to check on the Marauders Map'. Then he rushed up the stairs to the dormitory, taking the message with him."

Hermione, having sufficiently recovered from her mad dash to the Headmaster's office, continued the story. "We looked at each other for a second, then rushed up the stairs after him – but he slammed the dormitory door in our faces and locked it. It took a minute or two to break his locking charm – his magic has become very powerful – and when we got into the room, the window was open and he was gone. We found this on the floor," said Hermione, thrusting a crumpled piece of parchment across the Headmaster's desk, towards him, as she bit her lip, sobbing.

Dumbledore read the message aloud:

"Harry Potter,

I am holding Ginny Weasley captive.

I believe that she is a friend of yours – perhaps more than a friend.

I make you this offer: Her life for yours.

I swear a binding Wizard's Oath that if you come immediately - and alone – her life will be spared, and no harm will come to her.

I also swear that if you do not come, as requested, she will be tortured mercilessly and then killed.

To save her life, you must go as quickly as possible to the Hogwarts gates. On passing through them, look on the ground twenty feet to your right. You will find a silver branch in a zigzag shape - similar to that of your scar. Pick it up – it will bring you to me.

Decide quickly, I shall not wait long.

Which is it to be - your life or hers?

Lord Voldemort.”

“Harry must have transformed into an Eagle and flown to the school gates ... and taken Voldemort's Portkey...” said Hermione, sobbing again.

“I thought of grabbing a broom,” said Ron, “and trying to stop him, but it would have taken too long – he'd have been gone before I got there.”

“You're right,” said Rick, having closed his eyes for a moment to search for Harry. “You'd never have caught him in time – and if you had, he'd have hexed you if you'd tried to stop him – the damn fool! He's gone ... How on earth are we going to find him now?” he asked, turning towards a very sombre-looking Professor Dumbledore, who was still holding Voldemort's note in one hand.

“I have no idea...” replied Dumbledore, shaking his head sadly, looking suddenly very, very, old.

The four of them sat forlornly and wordlessly in the Headmaster's office for what seemed a very long time – although it was no more than five or ten minutes. The only sound was Hermione's constant sobbing, muffled by Rick's shoulder, in which she had buried her face.

Suddenly the door flew open. Rick, Hermione and Ron, turned around hopefully ... but it wasn't Harry – or Ginny – it was Professor Snape – and he looked terrible. The four occupants of the room jumped to their feet, as Snape staggered to Dumbledore's desk, leaning heavily on it for support. His normally pale face was parchment-white, sweat was pouring from his face, and his eyes were rolling about in his head.

"Potter," he finally managed to say. "He's got Potter and Weasley ... barrow..." he managed to gasp, before collapsing on the floor in front of the Headmaster's desk, where he lay on his back, writhing in agony, grasping at his left arm, with his right hand, just below the elbow.

Professor Dumbledore moved around his desk with surprising speed for a man of his age and knelt down next to his Potions master. He held a small bottle of what appeared to be Firewhiskey to Snape's lips. But Snape pushed Dumbledore's hand away, shaking his head violently. "Dark Mark!" he managed to get out, between his clenched teeth.

"Ah ... I understand," said Dumbledore, sympathetically. "Voldemort has summoned his remaining Death Eaters to the place he is holding Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. You have Apparated away, but your Dark Mark is drawing you back ... is that it, Severus?"

"Yes!" gasped Snape, nodding his head, as he bit his lip in pain. "Can't resist it..." he stammered, in despair.

"Professor," said Rick. "I think I can remove the Dark Mark from Professor Snape's arm ... can I try?"

Dumbledore looked towards Snape, who was staring at Rick in disbelief, while continuing to tremble with agony as he valiantly

resisted Voldemort's unrelenting summons. "Severus," said the Headmaster, "Mr. Godfrey has great powers – greater even than the one who put his mark on you. Your days as a spy are over – in deserting his gathering today, you have unequivocally revealed your true loyalties. The mark is of no further use to you ... it is only a source of torturous pain, which will very soon drag you back to him ... and certain destruction. Please, allow him to try..."

Snape nodded his head feebly, he knew he could not resist the pull of his Dark Mark for very much longer ... and then, his fate would be sealed. Dumbledore took a firm hold of Snape's left wrist, and pushed the sleeve up, revealing the Dark Mark just below the elbow. It had turned an angry raw red, and seemed to swell up and contract in a persistent throb. There was a faint smell of burning flesh. No wonder he's in agony, poor man, thought Rick, as he pointed his wand at the Dark Mark and allowed the spirit he could feel helping him guide him in this difficult task.

A bolt of the pure white light streamed from the end of Rick's wand into Snape's arm, and in a matter of seconds the Dark Mark was completely gone. Snape instantly ceased his manic trembling and grimacing as he stared at Rick in disbelief. Dumbledore and Rick helped Snape to his feet and manoeuvred him into a nearby chair. Although his Dark Mark was gone, he was exhausted from the battle he had waged against it.

"Thank you, Godfrey," said Snape, with uncharacteristic gratitude as he stared transfixed at the place where the Dark Mark had been. "Thank you very much." He took the small bottle of Firewhiskey which the Headmaster was once again proffering and knocked back a good slug, before taking a deep breath, and speaking again. "They are at Haughtons Heath, Headmaster, on Druids Barrow. Miss Weasley has not been harmed, but Potter, I fear ... is lost —"

"No!" gasped Hermione plaintively.

"Potter held his Reflecting Shield for a remarkably long time, but in the end, the Dark Lord's servants wore him down by keeping up a barrage of curses – and suffering the consequences. When he was no longer able to maintain the shield, the Dark Lord put Potter under

the Cruciatus Curse. It was then, that I finally managed to overcome the hold of my Dark Mark and Apparate away. I don't know how long it took me to get to your office from the school gates, but it is certain that Potter is finished by now. His mind will be gone, and the Dark Lord will have finished him off with the Killing Curse. I am very sorry Headmaster ... but there was nothing I could do," he said sincerely.

"I understand, Severus," said Dumbledore kindly. "But, perhaps it is not yet too late... Rick, Apparate to Druids Barrow immediately and protect Harry, if he is still alive. I shall go immediately to the school gates and Apparate from there."

"What the —" stammered Snape as Rick disappeared. He knew perfectly well that no one could Apparate or Disapparate within the Hogwarts wards. How was this possible?

His exclamation was cut short by Hermione. "Professor Dumbledore! Please take me with you. Harry may need my help. Rick can protect me with a Reflecting Shield ... please!"

"Very well, Miss Granger," he replied, "we may indeed have need of your extraordinary healing powers before this day is over." He went quickly to a cupboard and removed two brooms. Handing one to Hermione, he threw open a large window and climbing up to the ledge, straddled the broom. "Severus," he said turning back to his Potions Master, "I wish you to remain here at Hogwarts. Please inform Professor McGonagall of events, and, should I fail to return, please lend her all assistance required."

"Certainly, Headmaster," he said, nodding solemnly.

"Come, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore, leaping from the window on his broom. Ron, sensing his friend's nervousness – not about Voldemort, but about leaping from a window on a broom, stepped up behind her on the window-ledge and threw a leg over her broom, saying, "I'll fly you to the gates, if you like, Hermione."

"Thanks, Ron," she replied gratefully.

Druids Barrow was one of the largest of the ancient barrows to be found in this part of Britain. The inhabitants of old had constructed

these raised mounds of earth, usually on top of a hill, as funeral mounds for their leaders. Long ago, when the priests lit huge bonfires upon this barrow on the sacred nights to propitiate their gods, the flames could be seen from much of Haughtons Heath. The heath was little changed since those times – a desolate, uninhabited place, covered in heather and clumps of rough, reedy grass. Despite it being a sunny day, the heath still managed to look bleak and unwelcoming.

When Rick Apparated invisibly to the barrow, he first saw Ginny, who was bound to a pole which appeared to have been magically fixed upon the barrow. Although apparently unharmed, she was weeping uncontrollably. The reason for her distress was all too apparent. Lying on the ground, no more than ten feet from her was the body of Harry Potter. Voldemort stood ten feet to the other side of the prone body, at the centre-point of the barrow, gloating triumphantly. Circling the barrow in their black robes and masks were Voldemort's Death Eaters, who had been summoned to witness the moment of their Master's crowning victory.

Rick was surprised that Voldemort still had so many followers – there were at least two hundred of them. He shuddered as he turned his eyes upon Voldemort. This was not his original body, of course – the one he had encountered in the Nightmare Reality and at Godric's Hollow. It was the terrible creation of the Dark Magic he used that night in the graveyard at Little Hangleton to which Harry had been transported by the Triwizard Cup.

Voldemort stood regally in an arrogant pose at the centre of the barrow, with his arms crossed in front of him. He was tall and thin. His robes were black. Unlike his loyal Death Eaters who circled him, he wore no mask. Rick wished he did. Voldemort's white, skeletal face was a ghastly sight. It was like the head of an enormous snake, with those terrible scarlet, slit-pupilled eyes. He was utterly repulsive – the very personification of Evil.

"Regard, the great Harry Potter ... the saviour of the Light," said Voldemort derisively, to his followers. "What fools they were, to believe he could defeat me, Lord Voldemort," he crowed. "They said he was my nemesis, the one prophesied to be my downfall – the one who had the power to destroy me! Yes, a Prophecy was given," he

informed them. A soft murmur ran through the circle of Death Eaters – this was the first time their Master had mentioned the Prophecy.

“The Prophecy foretold that one of us would destroy the other. I always knew it was correct. But the fools of the Light – who even now still deign to oppose me – overlooked one inescapable truth. A truth of which I have made no secret – but one which they, in their stupidity, refuse to acknowledge: That I, Lord Voldemort, am immortal. There was never any doubt about which one of us would be the destroyer ... and which one the destroyed. This boy has thwarted me many times. As a baby he was responsible for the destruction of my body. He has caused me unending trouble. But see now, how he lies destroyed at my feet.”

“When the news reaches the wizarding world that The Boy Who Lived ... is dead, all resistance to my great cause will collapse. Our enemies will be demoralised. We will kill them all: Dumbledore and his pathetic Order of the Phoenix – and all those who support them – will be the first to die – followed by the Mudblood vermin and Squibs – including those who were formerly Death Eaters. I shall show no mercy to those who allowed themselves to be turned into foul loathsome Squibs. The Half-Bloods will put under the Imperious Curse and enslaved. They shall not be allowed to breed. Once the wizarding world has been purified we shall begin our campaign to conquer the Muggles. Victory shall be ours!” he cried, raising his arms upwards, as his followers cheered enthusiastically.

When he had tired of their cheering, Voldemort raised a hand and the Death Eaters immediately fell silent. “The Boy Who Lived – Ha!” spat Voldemort, scornfully. “And yet, still he lives – although he is now no more than a vegetable. His mind is destroyed – but I did not kill him ... yet...”

“In ancient times Dark Wizards used to burn their enemies alive – right here, on Druids Barrow,” said Voldemort, pointing to the barrow upon which he was standing. “This place has great magical energy. It was known to those who were faithful to the powers of the Dark, that one who performed the live sacrifice of his mortal enemy upon this sacred mound, would gain that enemy’s powers.”

“Thus, have I brought my mortal enemy, Harry Potter, to this place. I intend to perform the ancient ritual. I shall burn him alive, as a sacrifice to the Dark Powers and Demons. When, by this sacrifice, I have added his considerable magical powers to my own, I shall become the most powerful – and feared – wizard in history,” he boasted manically.

“You!” said Voldemort, pointing a finger randomly at one of his Death Eaters. “Step forward.” Then turning to a large pile of branches and brush that had been prepared near the centre of the barrow, he snapped his fingers and they burst into flames. “Levitate Potter onto the bonfire,” he ordered the Death Eater who had come forward. The Death Eater pointed his wand at the unconscious body, saying “Corpus Leviosa.” But instead of the body being levitated, the Death Eater rose in the air.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Voldemort angrily. “Crucio!” he said, pointing his wand at the Death Eater, who fell to the ground screaming and writhing in pain. “You!” snapped Voldemort, pointing to another Death Eater. “Come here and levitate Potter onto the bonfire.”

The second Death Eater tried, but he too rose up in the air. “I-It’s a Reflecting Shield, Master,” he stammered quickly, before Voldemort could turn the Cruciatus Curse on him as well.

“Nonsense!” screamed Voldemort, but his voice betrayed a hint of uncertainty. “Use the Cruciatus Curse on him,” ordered Voldemort.

“B-But Master, it will —” the Death Eater began protesting.

“Do as I tell you, before I use the Killing Curse ... on you! Hurry up,” he snapped, growing impatient, at the delay to his carefully laid plans. This ritual was to be his crowning glory – not just the defeat of Potter – the last hope of the Light – but, also, the acquisition of Potter’s powers. Voldemort was not going to let anyone or anything stand in the way of his moment of triumph.

“Crucio!” began the hapless Death Eater, immediately collapsing and convulsing in pain.

“Impossible! Potter’s a vegetable, totally incapable of casting a curse. One of you must be responsible for this. Who is it?” demanded Voldemort in a fury, as he cast a withering glare around the circle of Death Eaters. “Has any one of you seen another using their wand?” he demanded. “Hurry up and find the culprit, before I begin killing you, one-by-one – until this nonsense ends!” he screamed angrily,

A loud murmur rose up from the Death Eaters as they began to scrutinise their neighbours suspiciously – and fearfully.

Suddenly a loud, rasping, spectral voice boomed out, “It is I.”

“Who said that? Who are you?” demanded Voldemort, feigning a calmness and control that he no longer felt. The voice obviously did not belong to a Death Eater.

“Come, come, Voldemort, you can do better than that, surely you know exactly who I am ... Squibbus!” boomed the voice, which seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

“Don’t try that nonsense with me,” snarled Voldemort angrily. “You cannot Squib me or use any magic upon me at all ... observe,” he said haughtily, pointing his wand at a bush, which burst into flames.

“Yes, yes, I know all about your Cloak of Salazar Slytherin. But, you see, it wasn’t you I was Squibbing, it was your Death Eaters – or should I say ex-Death Eaters? I do believe I’ve Squibbed then all now ... every ... single ... last ... one.”

Voldemort looked on in absolute horror as his Death Eaters tried to use their wands to perform magic ... but to no avail. Voldemort had no further use for them ... and he hated Squibs with a passion. Not two minutes earlier, he had been promising to kill the foul loathsome creatures. They were desperate to escape. Unable to Apparate, they turned and ran off in all directions across the heath, hoping frantically to get away before Voldemort cursed them.

But Voldemort had other matters on his mind. Albus Dumbledore and an unknown witch had just Apparated to the barrow. Voldemort was

furious at what had happened to his Death Eaters, and at having his carefully laid plans to gain Potter's power through the ancient sacrificial ritual thwarted. But he was also becoming alarmed. He was certain the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor was no ghost at all – but a wizard ... and a very powerful one. The Squibbus Curse was something fabled and sought after, unsuccessfully, by generations of dark wizards – himself included.

Satisfied that he had, at least, finally defeated his great nemesis, Harry Potter, Voldemort decided to Apparate away, rather than risk a confrontation with a wizard with great and unknown power. The tables were now turned, and it was he who was outnumbered – Dumbledore may be an old fool – but he was a very powerful one. Frantically, he twisted his wand and gave the incantation but he couldn't Apparate. He knew he couldn't have been Squibbed because his cloak protected him from all forms of magic. However, he quickly tried a Banishing Charm on a nearby stone just to reassure himself. It worked – so why couldn't he Apparate?

"Ah, you are wondering why you cannot Apparate away, I suspect," said the ghost. "I have just placed anti-Apparition wards around this barrow. Since they are not cast on you directly, your protective cloak does not make you immune to them."

"Aperio Revelato!" said Voldemort, waving his wand around in a complete circle above his head. "And since my revealing spell is cast upon the vicinity and not the person, I can now see you!" he said glaring venomously at Rick, who was now plainly visible, standing close to Dumbledore and Ginny – who Dumbledore had freed from the post to which she'd been bound. They were beside Hermione who was bending over Harry's prone body.

"Tom," said Dumbledore calmly, "how remiss of me not to have introduced you to your other nemesis ... allow me to present Rick Godfry."

"Ha! My nemesis!" spat Voldemort contemptuously. "Don't use that word Dumbledore – you old fool. Nemesis suggests an antagonist of equal power. There is no wizard alive with power to match mine. Not you, not this fraudster Godfry, and not your great hope, Harry Potter!

Look at him Dumbledore, look what I have done to your champion ... the one they dared to call my nemesis ... I have destroyed him – utterly.”

“You think you are clever, you feeble old man,” he continued his harangue, glaring hatefully at his old foe. “You think because you somehow destroyed my Dark Creatures and turned my loyal servants into despicable Squibs, that I am finished. But you are wrong Dumbledore, very wrong... I have powers and protections that you cannot imagine. I am invincible. I will soon recruit more Death Eaters ... they will flock to my side ... as they always do... I can offer them powers and magic that make you and your kind tremble in your shoes. I will soon dispose of this Godfry nuisance, now I know who it is that has been troubling me of late, and there will be no further Squibbing of my new followers.”

“Brave words, Tom ... brave but foolish,” replied Dumbledore evenly. “Although you are correct in one thing, Rick Godfry is certainly not your equal. His powers are greater – far greater – than yours. I am not in the least bit concerned that you have finally learned who it is who has decimated your ranks and left you completely alone. You will not be leaving this place alive, Tom ... I promise you.”

“You? Promise? Ha, ha! What a joke,” laughed Voldemort arrogantly. “I fear no one – certainly not you – you senile old fool. Now that I have disposed of Potter and laid that infernal Prophecy to rest, there is no one and nothing that I fear!”

“Disposed of who?” demanded Harry, glaring at Voldemort, his wand at the ready. While Voldemort and Dumbledore had been exchanging barbs, Hermione had been working on Harry. She was now very experienced in reversing the effects of the Cruciatus Curse and it took her only a few minutes. Rick, aware of what she was doing, was ready – he obliviated Harry as soon as he regained consciousness.

Harry knew he'd been put under the Cruciatus Curse, but mercifully, he had no memory of the excruciating pain. Ginny, however, was not so lucky. Voldemort had taken sadistic pleasure in making her watch as he tortured the one she loved until he was nothing but a vegetable – it had been the worst moment of her life, even worse than being in

the Chamber of Secrets. She hugged Harry desperately after he'd been revived – it was as if he'd returned to her from the dead. But Harry had other business. There would be time for hugging Ginny later ... maybe ... if there was a later for him. He stood facing his hated enemy with a sense of destiny.

“Potter!” hissed Voldemort, completely stunned. For the first time that day, he began to feel he was losing control of events. “How in Hades did you recover after I held you under the Cruciatus Curse for so long ... it is simply not possible!”

“You must be losing your touch, Voldemort,” taunted Harry. “The Prophecy is not yet laid to rest, after all... Perhaps you'd like to try a Killing Curse?”

“Don't try your childish tricks on me, Potter!” snarled Voldemort. “You are all, no doubt, protected by a Reflecting Shield ... cast, I presume, by this mysterious Godfry. What are you, Godfry? Where did you come from?” he demanded, turning his fury upon Rick.

“I am your nemesis, Voldemort,” replied Rick. “I have come from the Light ... for one purpose ... and one purpose only ... to destroy you! I have followed you into the past and the future, into other realities in which you were seemingly victorious – but which I prevented from coming into existence.”

“Rubbish! You are talking complete nonsense – prove your claim!” demanded Voldemort.

“Alright,” said Rick. “Why don't you try killing me with a Killing Curse.”

“Stop this stupid game, boy! I have already had this inane conversation with Potter! I know all about your accursed Reflecting Shield. I have no desire to be struck by my own Killing Curse.”

“But you're protected by the Cloak of Salazar Slytherin, so what do you have to fear?” asked Rick innocently.

“That's none of your business,” snarled Voldemort angrily.

“Afraid that it may penetrate your cloak, like the curse you used on Harry sixteen years ago?” taunted Rick.

“Silence! Cease your insolent nonsense boy! I have not the slightest notion of what you speak!” snapped Voldemort, desperate to conceal the vulnerability of his cloak.

“Yes, you do,” replied Rick, calmly. “I was there sixteen years ago when it happened. I went back in time. You didn’t see me in the Potters’ garden at Godric’s Hollow that Halloween night, because I was invisible – but I was there.”

“Lies!” retorted Voldemort.

“Lies?” asked Rick. “What’s your memory like Voldemort? Can you remember what you said to baby Harry after you’d killed Lily Potter? I can: ‘Pettigrew said that I would not be able to touch you; but there’s no need to touch you to kill you with a curse, my little enemy. I know – I’ll try putting my mark on you first. If I can do that, then I’ll certainly be able to kill you.’ Then you put that mark on Harry’s forehead,” said Rick, staring at Voldemort unwaveringly.

Voldemort gaped at Rick, totally stunned, as if he was some new unheard of species, before suddenly narrowing his eyes and glaring at him malevolently as realisation dawned upon him. “So, it was you! It was you who stopped my Killing Curse, that night! You cast that infernal Reflecting Shield of yours! I always knew there was no way Potter’s mother could have been the source of his protection. Blood magic could never have stopped a Killing Curse – nothing can – except for that blasted Reflecting Shield! So that’s why I was able to put that accursed mark on him – you weren’t protecting him then. It is you who was responsible for the destruction of my body ... for the years and years of pain and suffering I endured. I owe you a debt Godfry ... and it will be repaid ... in full – of that you may be sure. You will rue the day you came to meddle in my affairs.”

“Brave words, Voldemort,” said Rick, fearlessly, not intimidated in the least. “Do you remember where your Killing Curse struck you, when it rebounded off Harry? Probably not, you were too busy trying to get away. But I can tell you, it was four inches beneath your right armpit.”

Voldemort immediately brought his right arm down to cover the spot, as he continued to glare hatefully at Rick.

“That won’t help you now, Voldemort, it’s too late,” said Rick. “You have realised, no doubt, that the rebounding Killing Curse damaged your cloak. The place it struck is your point of vulnerability ... your Achilles Heel. While you were busy chatting with Professor Dumbledore earlier, I thought I might try a little experiment and see if there is a weakness there ... there is. I was able to use a Severing Charm on that spot. In fact, I tore away the front of your cloak – your front is completely exposed from your shoulders to your waist,” said Rick grinning.

“No!” gasped Voldemort in horror, frantically trying to cover his chest with his arms.

“Goodbye, Tom,” said Dumbledore, purposefully pointing his wand at Voldemort.

“Ha!” sneered Voldemort. “Did you really think it would be so easy to kill me, you hair-brained old fool? I have more protections than you know of... Some months ago, I came across a very interesting spell, which I cast upon myself. You’ll pardon me, if I don’t reveal the incantation. It’s called the Mirror of Fate. The effects of any spell cast upon me, are instantly mirrored back to the caster. So, for example, if you were to cast a Killing Curse on me ... and succeeded in killing me ... you would also die.”

Dumbledore doubtfully pointed his wand at Voldemort’s chest performing a small Levitation Charm. They both rose a few feet in the air, before returning to the ground.

Voldemort grinned smugly.

“It is unfortunate Tom,” said Dumbledore solemnly, “that in order to rid the world of your evil, I must give up my own life. But, I have had a long and fruitful life, and I am prepared to make the sacrifice. I cannot think of a more meaningful way to leave this realm, than with —”

“No, Professor, yelled Harry – don’t do it! This is my fight and my fate. Because of the Mirror of Fate spell, the special property of my scar becomes meaningless. Whoever kills this evil bastard is going to die. Hogwarts needs you – not me. This monster killed my parents in cold blood, he tried to kill me. It is my duty to my parents to avenge their deaths. The Prophecy says: either must die at the hand of the other. It is my fate to kill him ... and suffer the consequences.”

“No, Harry!” screamed Ginny, throwing her arms around him desperately. “Please don’t do it!”

“Harry, please,” begged Hermione, tearfully. “The Prophecy also says for neither can live while the other survives. The Mirror of Fate spell, like the special property of your scar proves that the Prophecy is rubbish! If you kill Voldemort and die, then the Prophecy will be wrong; and if someone else does it, then it will still be wrong. Whatever happens, it’s wrong! Please, Harry, forget about that ridiculous Prophecy!”

“And let Professor Dumbledore die?” asked Harry, looking accusingly at Hermione and Ginny, who looked away in distress at the terrible dilemma.

“Harry, I am an old man,” said Dumbledore, laying a hand gently on his shoulder. “I have lived more years than most ... and cannot expect to have a great many more before me. I have lived a good life; done what I believed was right; fought my battles; laughed and loved. Death does not frighten me. If there is nothing beyond this life it will be a very pleasant and well-earned rest, free from pain and pleasure, from hope and fear. And if there is something beyond this life ... well, then I am eager and curious to know what it might be.”

“But, you Harry, are a young man, of great promise,” continued Dumbledore. “Your parents did not lay down their lives for you to throw yours away, avenging their sacrifice. Doing honour to their memory, and their sacrifice, does not require you to die like this. On the contrary, it requires you to live your life to the very best of your ability, to live a good and happy life, one which benefits others and brings them joy.”

“If I may be allowed to interrupt this tear-jerking sentimental claptrap ...” sneered Voldemort contemptuously. “I am greatly flattered that you brave and brainless Gryffindors should be fighting for the privilege of laying down your worthless lives for the sake of ending mine ... but, there is something you imbeciles have completely over-looked in your moronic heroism...”

All eyes turned to Voldemort.

“Did it ever cross your feeble minds to ask why I did not die sixteen years ago when I was struck by my own Killing Curse? There was nothing wrong with the curse – in fact, the Reflecting Shield increased its strength. I pride myself on my Killing Curses, and, believe me, I have had plenty of practice with them ... on hundreds – if not thousands – of victims. They have never failed. Never ... except for that one. Did you ever wonder why?” asked Voldemort rhetorically, a cruel grin touching the corners of his hideous mouth.

“Since you are all too obtuse to see the glaringly obvious, I will tell you... It is because I cannot be killed. I spent many years researching immortality. I eventually learned it was not possible to make the human body immortal. However, I discovered an elemental ritual – extremely potent Dark Magic – with which I succeeded in binding my spirit to the dark energy of the universe. In so doing, my spirit acquired the properties of that energy. The magic which binds my spirit to the indestructible dark forces renders my spirit indestructible – immortal. That is why, though my body was destroyed sixteen years ago, my spirit survived. Living as a disembodied spirit was a torturous existence, but eventually I acquired another body.”

“If you kill me,” continued Voldemort darkly, “my body will die ... but not my spirit. I will suffer again the pain of disembodied existence, but, in a few years I shall appear again in the world, to continue my campaign. It won’t take me so long next time, now that I understand the dynamics of rebirth. Of one thing you may be absolutely certain: I shall return, and, inevitably, I shall triumph over you all ... in the end, victory shall be mine!”

“I, Lord Voldemort, have nothing to fear from death. But, for the one who kills me, death will be permanent. The death of their body will be

the final end for them. Now, which one of you wants to throw your miserable life away now, to inconvenience me for a few years?" taunted Voldemort, mockingly.

"I do," said Dumbledore, steadfastly. "Even if it is only a temporary setback for you, it will give the Light a chance to grow strong again and be ready to resist you once more, when you return."

"No, Professor!" yelled Harry. "To grow strong enough to resist his evil, the Light needs your leadership. It is my destiny to kill him..." Harry suddenly leapt up in the air using the Somes Leviosa charm Rick had taught him at the Burrow.

"No, Harry, don't!" screamed Ginny and Hermione, together.

Despite his apparent nonchalance, and seeming lack of concern at the prospect of losing his body again, Voldemort had turned side-on to the others on the barrow, after Dumbledore's Levitation Charm had confirmed that his chest was completely unprotected. Harry's intention was to get into a position where he had a clear shot at Voldemort's chest. He either didn't realise, or didn't care, that in leaping away from the others he was no longer protected by Rick's Reflecting Shield ... but Voldemort realised it.

Four curses rang out in unison. Harry Potter and Voldemort with wands pointed at each other, their eyes locked together in deadly hatred, screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

Voldemort had tried in vain to twist his chest away from Harry, but it was not far enough to hide it from him. However, in twisting away, he again exposed it to Professor Dumbledore and Rick.

"Avada Kedavra!" cried Albus Dumbledore.

"Squibbus!" cried Rick Godfry.

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

Coming up: Chapter 34 - A Midsummer Night's Dream

The final chapter in which all shall be revealed...

Chapter 34 - A Midsummer Night's Dream

The boy stood lost in thought, staring out through the window at the hillside of yellow tussock grass waving gently in the breeze. There was no glass in the window; it was just a square hole in the rough stone wall of what used to be a shepherds' summer shelter, high up in the mountains.

He was a handsome boy, with dark brown hair and warm affectionate brown eyes. His height was about average. He wore a faded yellow tee-shirt, a pair of khaki shorts, and sandals. It was a beautiful summer's day. Small flocks of wrens and alpine finches chirped and twittered as they fed on the grass seed. The breeze carried the subtle sweet scents of the mountain grasses and flowers. But the beauty of the day was lost on the boy. He did not delight in its sweet smells, or the charming songs of the birds. He was completely oblivious to the beauty all around him.

This was his special place – where he could be alone with his fantasies. The real world that lay far below could not intrude upon him up here. He could pretend, for a while, that it didn't exist, that it wasn't real. Up here, he lived in his fantasy world. He could believe that it was the real world. He had always had a vivid imagination. But since the accident, he lived more than ever in his fantasy world. Sometimes he found it hard to tell what was real and what was imaginary.

The accident... Their car had skidded on the icy mountain road and broken through the safety barrier. It was a miracle that he and his parents had survived – they had been certain they were about to die. Fortunately, after a short plunge, the car had landed in a thicket of dense bushes, vines and small trees, in which it became entangled – preventing it from plummeting thousands of feet further down the mountainside.

After the accident, he lay in a coma for weeks in hospital. When he finally regained consciousness, it was hard to believe at first, that he was back here – or still here – in this world. Was the other world really just a dream, a figment of his imagination? It had seemed so real – so fantastically real – so utterly wonderful. Could it simply have

been his imagination, and the effect of the head injury and the medication?

He was fully recovered now – in body at least. When he awoke in hospital, and found himself, once more, in this world, he felt a sense of profound loss. He was back in the same dull, two-dimensional, monochrome existence that he had known. In his imagination, he had experienced a far richer world – a world in which he felt truly alive. A world for which he desperately cared; where he had a great purpose – and his life had meaning. But most of all, it was a world in which he found love... How could it all be just a dream? he asked himself over and over again. He felt bereft. He longed for that world. His heart ached ... for her.

His reverie was broken as something on the hillside caught his eye... a movement, a colour, which seemed somehow out of place in the sea of yellow rippling tussock grass. There it was again, a flash of brown, disappearing for a few moments and then reappearing. Whatever it was, it was coming up the hillside towards the shelter. He stepped outside to try to catch a better view of it.

It was an animal of some sort, but unlike any he had ever seen up here in the high country. Finally it left the cover of the tussock grass and unhesitatingly began to lope up the rough-trodden path that led to the shelter. It looks a bit like a fox, he thought in surprise. I've never seen or heard of foxes around here ... a fox wouldn't move like that – out in the open – in broad daylight... Is it possible? Could it be? No, of course not! That whole world isn't real ... it only exists in my imagination ... it was all just a dream. I've got to get a grip on myself ... I'm confusing the real world with my fantasy world...

The fox continued up the path until it reached the shelter. It stopped a few feet from the boy and looked up at him, fixing its gaze steadily upon his face. The boy was stunned. It was her – there was no doubt about it – right down to the bushy fur on its head. But how can it be her? She isn't real ... it was all just a dream ... wasn't it? He hesitantly reached his hand down to the fox. It didn't flinch or try move away, it just continued to regard him with those intense brown eyes. Gently, he patted it on the head. "Hermione?" he whispered, unbelievably.

He jerked back his hand as the fox seemed to twirl around. First, a head appeared, followed by arms and legs. When the transformation was complete, standing before him was Hermione Granger, smiling joyfully. "Hermione? B-but how? ... How can this be?" he asked in a shaking voice which betrayed extreme emotional turmoil and mental confusion. "Is it really you, Hermione?" Or have I finally gone over the edge? Rick asked himself fearfully.

"Rick! It's me," she said staring at him rapturously, "and I've missed you so much!"

Part of him wanted to throw his arms around her ... and never let her go. But another part of him recoiled from her in disbelief and fear – fear for his own sanity. "B-but you're not real..." stammered Rick. "You're a character out of a book ... how can you come to life like this? It's not possible!"

Hermione resisted the impulse to throw herself into Rick's arms and kiss him, as she had dreamt of doing endlessly, since he disappeared that day on Druids Barrow. She could see that he was in psychological turmoil, not knowing what to believe. Had he lost all memory of his time in her world when he returned to his own?

"Rick, do you remember being at Hogwarts for nine months? Do you remember Squibbing Voldemort? Do you remember that ... we were..." she asked, blushing as she spoke the last words.

"My name isn't Rick, it's..." he said, his voice trailing off as he sorted through all the thoughts, memories, and dreams which were swirling wildly around in his mind. He was trying desperately to distil what was real from what was not. Finally, he continued speaking. "But, after the accident, while I was in a coma, I dreamed that I was Rick ... Rick Godfry. I dreamed I was a student at Hogwarts and that ... you and I... The dream ended abruptly, when I Squibbed Voldemort. When I regained consciousness, I found I was still here in this world – the real world – the one in which I grew up. Then I knew it had all been a dream – just a wonderful, beautiful, amazing dream."

"It wasn't a dream, Rick! It was real – it all happened. But when you Squibbed Voldemort, you vanished."

“But it was a dream – it must have been a dream. Otherwise ... otherwise, I’ve gone completely crazy,” he sighed.

“And how do you explain the fact that I’m standing here, right before you, having just transformed from a fox?” asked Hermione, smiling gently.

“I must still be dreaming ... you’re not real,” he said, shaking his head from side-to-side, desperately wanting to believe she was real – but afraid that to do so would be a leap into madness.

“Well, I think I can prove just how real I am,” said Hermione with a grin. She threw her arms around Rick’s neck and kissed him passionately. He responded immediately, embracing her desperately, as if his very life depended upon it.

“Oh, Hermione,” he gasped as he released her. It felt so good kissing her ... so real ... but was it real? Or was he crazy? In that moment, he decided the only thing to do was to act as if it was real. If it wasn’t, it would soon become painfully obvious – they’d be dragging him off to an asylum. He wanted desperately to believe it was real.

“I’ve missed you so much, Hermione. Life has been unbearable without you,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“It’s been unbearable for me too,” said Hermione, tearfully. “That’s why I came.”

“How long can you stay?” asked Rick, realising with a sudden pang that they were almost certainly doomed to separation, again.

“The Gateway of Reality, through which I came, is open for two hours only,” she replied. Then looking at her watch, she added, “I’ve got another hour and forty minutes.”

Rick felt as if a knife had been thrust through his heart. He struggled to force back the tears. He had less than two hours with Hermione – he was determined not to allow himself be miserable – there would be plenty of time for that later...

They sat down beside each other on the wide step in front of the doorway, staring out over the yellow tussock grass waving about on the hillside. "Hermione, how did you manage to get here ... how is it possible?" asked Rick.

"We'll get to that later, Rick," said Hermione, sounding like she had a clearly ordered agenda for their short time together. "First, I want to ask you about that day on Druids Barrow. Why did you use the Squibbus Curse on Voldemort? What were you thinking?"

Rick closed his eyes, casting his mind back to that day. He had thought over the events of that fateful day so many times – but he had been accustomed to thinking of it as a fragment of a dream – now he had to alter his perspective and treat it as if it were real – perhaps it was – there would be time to decide on that later.

"What happened to Harry?" he asked urgently, "Is he OK?"

"Harry's fine," replied Hermione with a reassuring smile. "He and Ginny are the happiest pair of lovebirds you ever saw ... but, Rick, please answer my question ... why did you use the Squibbus Curse?"

"Well, although it all happened rather quickly, when Harry, Voldemort and Dumbledore all screamed the Killing Curse together, things had been moving in that direction for a while – which gave me time to think over the possible scenarios. Because of his Mirror of Fate spell, whoever killed Voldemort was certain to die as well. If Harry got his curse in first, then Voldemort and Harry would die. If Dumbledore beat Harry to it, then Voldemort and Dumbledore would die. But, when Harry used the Somes Leviosa charm and started jumping about – unprotected by a Reflecting Shield – there was a third possibility: Voldemort's Killing Curse would win – killing Harry. In fact, given his experience with the Killing Curse, it seemed the most likely outcome. Dumbledore's curse would then kill Voldemort ... and all three of them would die."

"So you cast the Squibbus Curse to save Harry or Dumbledore – probably both of them?" asked Hermione.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Rick. “I had to. The Squibbus Curse is instantaneous – so although I cast it at the same time as the three of them began their Killing Curses, I knew I could Squib Voldemort before he finished his Killing Curse – or Harry’s or Dumbledore’s curse got to him. But there was another reason as well. Regardless of whether Harry or Dumbledore killed Voldemort, it wasn’t going to be permanent ... Voldemort was certain to return – some day.”

“Yes, I know,” replied Hermione. “After the four of us got back to Hogwarts from Druids Barrow, we had a long talk about it in Dumbledore’s office, trying to piece together what had happened – Ron and Snape were there as well. Dumbledore pretty much figured out your motives, just as you’ve explained. Squibbing Voldemort, and destroying his magic, had three significant consequences: Firstly, it stopped him killing Harry. Secondly, it neutralised his Mirror of Fate spell, so that neither Harry nor Dumbledore would be killed when their curse killed Voldemort. And, thirdly, it destroyed Voldemort’s bond to the dark energies which made his spirit immortal. So when the Killing Curse struck him, he died – utterly – never to return. That was your plan, wasn’t it Rick?”

Rick laughed. “You can read me like a book, Hermione. So, whose curse did actually reach Voldemort first?”

“Harry’s,” replied Hermione. “There were no pyrotechnics or drama as you described from the time at Godric’s Hollow when Voldemort tried to kill Harry as a baby, or in the Nightmare Reality when he tried to kill you – thinking you were Draco Malfoy. Voldemort just dropped down dead – like a Squib. How ironic – the great Lord Voldemort died as the thing he most despised – a Squib. In that same instant, you disappeared...”

“So although the Prophecy was wrong in many ways, it was right about one of them killing the other – it was Harry, who killed Voldemort in the end,” reflected Rick.

“Yes,” said Hermione, her mind clearly occupied with more important things than Trelawney’s ridiculous Prophecy. “Rick, when you were thinking over all those scenarios, didn’t it occur to you that if you

Squibbed Voldemort, that you, too, would be Squibbed?" she asked, in a shaky voice.

"Yeah," answered Rick slowly, sighing heavily. "I knew I'd be Squibbed by Voldemort's Mirror of Fate spell, because it would act instantly before his magic had been destroyed – but what was the alternative? Let Harry or Dumbledore –

or both of them – die? Allow Voldemort to come back again ... and again – until he succeeded in turning the world into that Nightmare Reality. How could I allow all of that to happen – just for the sake of keeping my magic? Voldemort's Death Eaters and Dark Creatures were already destroyed. Once he was dead – permanently – the task I'd been sent for was completed – so it didn't matter if I lost my magic..."

"Oh Rick," cried Hermione, "How can you say that? What did you think would happen after you Squibbed Voldemort? I'm not suggesting even for a minute that you shouldn't have done it... It was the right thing to do, it was terribly brave, and I'm enormously proud of you. But what did you think your life would be like after sacrificing your magic?"

"I didn't expect to just disappear and end up here, back in my old reality," he replied. "I realised that, as a Squib, I'd have to leave Hogwarts ... but there wasn't time to think any further ahead. If I hadn't disappeared – if I'd stayed in your world – I guess I would have lived a quiet life as a Squib somewhere, maybe in that little village of Stourmouth, where I Squibbed all those Death Eaters. It's a real mixture: wizards, witches, Squibs and Muggles. I wouldn't have wanted to leave the magical world entirely."

"And what about me?" asked Hermione, hesitantly.

"I don't know, Hermione," answered Rick sadly. "I would have felt the same way about you ... I still do. But would you have felt the same way about me if I was ... just a Squib?"

"Oh, Rick! How can ask such a question? It's you I love, not your magic ... or the magic you had. I would have wanted to be with you –

in Stornmouth ... or anywhere else – after I'd finished school ... I mean, if you wanted to be with me."

"Hermione," said Rick pulling her close, "I want to be with you more than anything in the..." But he stopped, as he remembered that he couldn't ... soon she would have to go... Pushing away that dreadful thought, he asked, "Did you ever talk to Dumbledore about why I disappeared? When I first came to Hogwarts, he said after the war was over, and my purpose was fulfilled, I'd remain in your world. Do you understand why I didn't?" asked Rick sadly.

"We talked about it a lot ... Dumbledore was quite certain it wasn't because Voldemort was dead and your mission was over. He said it was almost certainly because you were a Squib."

"But why?" asked Rick, puzzled. "Why didn't I remain in your world as a Squib?"

"It's difficult to explain," said Hermione, focussing her eyes on a distant clump of tussock grass. "What allowed you to appear in our world was magic. The magic was bestowed upon your spirit by the great witches and wizards of the Light, before you appeared at Hogwarts. You were only able to appear in our world because of that magic. Once it was gone ... you couldn't remain."

"But how did you find me?" asked Rick. "How did you even know I was alive?"

"It's strange Rick," replied Hermione. "You know I'm not one for extra-sensory phenomena, and all that nonsense – like Parvati and Lavender – but ... well, it was as though I could still feel your presence ... somehow. It just felt to me like you were still alive – somewhere... Dumbledore said that if the magic which brought you to our world had been suddenly voided by the Squibbus Curse, then perhaps you had not died in your world, after all..."

"But Dumbledore told me I had died before I appeared in your world," said Rick, confused.

“Yes, that’s what he thought – but there’s another possibility. It’s sometimes referred to as a near-death experience. Your heart stops – the body is clinically dead – and your spirit is temporarily freed. But then the heart begins beating again, your spirit is pulled back, and you live. Or maybe it’s the other way around – maybe your spirit decides to go back, and so your heart starts beating again. Perhaps that happened to you. When your spirit left your body, the witches and wizards of the light chose it for their mission ... and you – Rick Godfry – appeared in our world. But when you lost your magic, it was as if all of that was undone. Your spirit returned to your body in this world, and it started functioning again.”

“Well, actually, something like that did happen. Just after they got me to the hospital I did die – clinically– but they revived me, and my heart began beating again. Afterwards, I was in a coma for weeks. But it still doesn’t make sense, Hermione. I was clinically dead for less than a minute, yet I was in your world for nine months.”

“That’s because they are completely different realities. There is no correspondence between them in any way, including time. In fact, the only common thread between them is you – your spirit,” said Hermione. “Once I realised that you might be alive ... somewhere, in some other reality, I was determined to try to find you ... it became an obsession.”

“What about your revision schedule and the exams?” asked Rick with a smile.

“I threw away my revision schedule – how could I think of studying? I sat the exams, of course —”

“And still came top in all your subjects, I’ll bet,” said Rick with a smile.

“Err, yes, I did,” replied Hermione modestly. “But only because you weren’t there. Rick, I would have preferred to have come second – to you – and not be the sixth-year dux. You have no idea how miserable and lonely it’s been for me,” she said, a tear rolling down her cheek.

Rick put his arm around Hermione as they sat together on the step. She wiped her eyes, lifting her chin, and continued. “I went to the

Forbidden Forest and had a long – and rather confusing – conversation with Firenze. It's notoriously difficult getting a straight answer from a centaur. He said that the reflection of all realities, and all times, could be seen in the Heavens ... if one knew how to look. When I asked him about you, he said something like 'His light still shineth'. When I asked him if there was any way for me to get to your reality, he just looked up at the sky and said, 'This forest hides many secrets and doorways from you humans ... I shall consult the stars'."

"Professor Dumbledore allowed me to miss classes, and arranged special access to the Ministry of Magic Reference Library; I spent weeks there doing research."

"Research into what?" asked Rick.

"My first topic was to identify where magic actually resides in a witch or wizard," replied Hermione.

"What was the point of that?" asked Rick, curiously.

"I was trying to discover if magic was located in the body, the mind, or the spirit. It's not a subject that has ever been seriously researched. I searched through hundreds and hundreds of books. Finally, I found some clues in a very ancient text that goes back almost to the time of Merlin."

"But, Hermione, why were you doing that? I don't understand..." said Rick becoming more and more perplexed.

"My second topic of research," continued Hermione, ignoring Rick's question, "was into how charms, curses and hexes act on a person. It's really fascinating. Some of them, like the Immobilus, Impedimenta and Cruciatus curses, work on the body. Others, like the Cheering and Confundus charms– as well as the Imperius curse, work on the mind. In all my research, I could find only two spells that work on the spirit. The Avada Kedavra curse is one. It severs the spirit from the body – causing instant death without any apparent physical damage."

"What's the other?" asked Rick.

"The Squibbus Curse," replied Hermione, looking at Rick significantly.

"But, how can you know that?" asked Rick.

"Because it destroys the magic of the witch or wizard," answered Hermione. "That means it must act on wherever it is that magic resides. The conclusion of my first research topic was that magic, very probably, resides within the spirit. But the most conclusive evidence, in fact, is you."

"Me?" asked Rick.

"The magic you received from the great witches and wizards of the Light was bestowed upon your spirit," said Hermione, smiling at Rick.

"Yeah, I guess that's true," agreed Rick. "But what does it mean ... I don't quite follow the point of all your research ... what were you trying to achieve?"

"Well, isn't it obvious?" asked Hermione. "I was trying to find out how to reverse the effects of the Squibbus Curse."

"What?" asked Rick, completely stunned. "But it's irreversible ... isn't it?"

"If the Squibbus Curse affects the body," said Hermione, unable to contain her excitement, "it wouldn't be possible to reverse it – because your present body is not the one that appeared in our world – although, it looks identical. But, my research suggests that the Squibbus Curse acts on the spirit. My other research, points to the spirit as the place where magic resides. The spirit that is within you now, is the same spirit which was blessed with all the magic of the great witches and wizards; it appeared in our world and it was damaged by the Squibbus Curse ... Don't you see Rick? I may be able to heal you and —"

"Heal me? What do you mean heal me?" asked Rick, a ray of hope suddenly bursting through the cloud of gloom which had become his constant companion.

“Many curses work by causing injury of some kind. If the Squibbus Curse works by injuring the spirit, I may be able to heal it, and —”

“What?” asked Rick, incredulously. “You mean I’d get my magic back? I’d become a wizard again? But what would I do in this world as a wizard?” he asked.

Hermione laughed. “Don’t be silly, Rick, I’m not leaving you here – you’re coming back with me! I’ve come here to get you!”

Rick was stunned. He turned with his mouth agape in disbelief, staring wordlessly at Hermione.

“Err ... maybe I should explain the whole plan,” continued Hermione, as Rick seemed temporarily incapable of speech. “After I’d completed my research and concluded that it might be possible to heal the injury to your spirit, caused by the Squibbus Curse, I had another conversation with Firenze about getting to your reality. He said: ‘At the Solstice Full Moon, which is the rare conjunction of Midsummer Eve with the full moon, the two Realities will briefly intersect for an hour on either side of the cusp of night. There is a primordial chasm sequestered deep within this forest, known as the Gateway of Reality. It is unreachable to humans – witches and wizards, included. Come to this spot as a fox, fifteen minutes before the crucial time, and I will lead you there.’”

“I asked Firenze how I would find you when I reached your reality. He said, ‘When you descend into the chasm, which is known as the Gateway of Reality, you will come to a labyrinth of tunnels. If you focus your mind unwaveringly on that which you seek, your animal instincts will guide you, unwaveringly.’ It was just like he said – I knew exactly which way to go as I threaded my way through the maze of tunnels, until I came out just down there,” she said, pointing to a spot a few hundred feet further down the hillside.

“That’s amazing,” said Rick, shaking his head in wonder. “But how can you take me back with you?”

“I’m going to try to reverse the Squibbus Curse, and restore your magic. Then we’ll both transform into foxes, and return, the way I came. You’ll be magical again, so you’ll be able to live in our world,” she added, betraying more than a trace of anxiety.

Rick continued to stare at her. The idea that he might return to the world he loved – with the one he loved – was tantalising beyond belief ... it seemed, somehow, too good to be true. “A lot of things could go wrong, couldn’t they, Hermione? I’m sure you’ve already figured out all the possibilities ... so, you better tell me.”

Hermione let out a long nervous sigh, as she stared up at the sky. “Nothing like this has ever been done before. There is no way of knowing what the chances are of success. The first thing that could go wrong is that you’ll die from Snape’s potion.”

“Snape’s potion? What potion? Is Snape in on this too?”

“Err, yes. It was mainly Professor Dumbledore who helped me with the plan, but Firenze and Snape helped too. Snape brewed two very rare and difficult potions. The first one, the Draft of Dissolution will ... err ... kill you, but —”

“Kill me?” gulped Rick.

“Err ... yes, just for a while, though. You need to be clinically dead again, for me to work on your spirit. I will heal your spirit, and then Snape’s second potion will kick in. It’s an ancient potion used by Necromancers, which will nullify the first potion, and then revive you. Err ... it’s Dark Magic, but Dumbledore agreed to let Snape brew it.”

“Err, Hermione,” I hate to state the obvious, said Rick. “But how am I going to drink Snape’s second potion, if I’m ... dead?”

“Oh, but you drink the second potion first,” explained Hermione, “immediately before the Draft of Dissolution. Snape added something that delays its effects for three minutes, to give you time to, err ... die, and for me to heal your spirit. It’s risky, I know ... and if you don’t want

to take the risk, I'll understand. I'll just stay here with you ... if you'll let me," she added shyly, looking down at her feet.

"But of course I'll take the risk!" said Rick emphatically. "This life ... without magic ... without you ... it's so empty and pointless. I'd risk anything to go back with you. But why are you talking about staying here?"

"Well," said Hermione, looking down shyly, "I identified a number of scenarios which would prevent you from returning with me. You might not have wanted to risk taking the Draft of Dissolution – and I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't. Or, Snape's potions may work perfectly, but I may not succeed in healing the injury to your spirit. That would leave you without magic, which means you couldn't return with me either. I decided that if either of those scenarios eventuated, then I wouldn't return – I'd stay here with you in your world ... err ... if you wanted me to... I left a letter with Professor Dumbledore to give to my parents ... in case I don't come back."

Rick couldn't help but kiss Hermione affectionately. He found it difficult to speak. Finally, he said in a thick voice. "Thanks, Hermione ... but, as much as I want to be with you, I would never let you give up your whole world for me. Anyway, it probably won't come to that. I'm going to put my fate in Snape's hands and take both the potions; and I have absolute faith in your ability to heal my spirit."

"I'll try to deserve your faith," said Hermione, blushing. "And you can trust Snape to have done his very best for you, too. He's been a different person since you removed his Dark Mark, and the death of Voldemort ... he's almost pleasant, at times. Ron keeps muttering about how scary it is. Snape was really eager to help. I think he feels a great debt to you, both personally and for the wizarding world. He's one of the few who really knows what happened on Druids Barrow, and what you sacrificed for us all. Err ... there's also another scenario I haven't mentioned, yet," said Hermione, nervously.

"What's that?" asked Rick.

"Well, even if everything goes to plan and you get your magic back ... Firenze wasn't certain it would be possible for us to get back the

opposite way through the Gateway of Reality. I tried to find out what the probability was of that happening, but centaurs are so vague – I really have no idea at all. We may both be stuck here – the only witch and wizard in this reality...”

“Well, that would be a whole different adventure,” said Rick thoughtfully. “If it has to be two out of the three, having you and having my magic are the two I would choose, said Rick.

“Me too,” said Hermione. “But let’s try for three out of three.”

“Yes, let’s ... I’m ready,” said Rick turning to kiss Hermione.
Note: Epilogue still to come ...

Please take a few moments to leave a review ...

- Epilogue -

It was a beautiful, enchanted mid-summer's night. The full moon shone brightly, illuminating the Hogwarts castle and the surrounding grounds. Moonbeams danced playfully upon the ripples on the lake – stirred up by the giant squid and the large dolphin playing in the moonlight. In the castle, all was dark, except for three adjacent windows. The students and most of the staff had departed the school a few days earlier for the summer holidays.

From the dark edge of the Forbidden Forest, two foxes emerged ... playing joyfully ... chasing and tumbling exuberantly over each other. But in the twinkling of an eye, the foxes were gone, and in their places stood a witch and a wizard. The wizard remained motionless for a long time, staring, as if transfixed by a vision. He was gazing, enraptured, upon the ancient castle with its familiar towers and turrets, as it stood bathed in moonlight, like some great benign being.

"Hermione," said Rick. "That's the most beautiful sight in the whole world. This is the happiest moment of my life ... and I owe it all to you... How can I ever repay you?"

"Well, since you're asking ... I can think of a way..." said Hermione grinning at him slyly. "You could let me beat you next year when we take our NEWTS. I really, really want to be dux in our final year."

"For you, Hermione, I'd do anything. I promise I'll do my best ... or is it my worst?" he laughed. "Hey, there are lights in Dumbledore's office; he must be waiting for us ... maybe we should hurry."

"Of course he's waiting for us ... Snape will be with him. That's why I was trying to hurry you up when you were writing the note to tell your parents not to worry and why you'd disappeared – why did it take so long?"

"Err ... it was a bit more than a note," replied Rick. "You see, after I left the hospital, I seemed to spend all my time thinking about the nine months I was here – except, of course, I thought it was just some incredible dream. I think I told you once how people used to

write their own Harry Potter stories ... well, I decided to write a story about my dream..."

"But Rick, you cheated!" protested Hermione. "You weren't making up a story – it was all true!"

"Yeah, I know that now – but at the time, I thought it was all a dream." said Rick, as they walked on, hand-in-hand, giving the Whomping Willow a wide berth. "I used to bring my notebook computer up to the shelter to write. The story was finished ... except for the final part ... what happened today, when you came. That's what I was writing about, before we left the shelter. I put a note on top of the notebook, for my parents – telling them how to find the story and to read it ... and that it's all true – I really hope they believe it. I also asked them to send the final chapter to a friend of mine, to post it ... err, that's so other people can read it."

"So, what did you call your story?"

"The Ghost of Godric Gryffindor."

"That's more appropriate than you may have realised," said Hermione.

"Why's that?" asked Rick.

"Because as far as the Wizarding world is concerned, it was the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor – and not you – who destroyed Voldemort's magic, allowing Harry to finally defeat him. Apart from Dumbledore, Harry, Ginny, and I, who were there, only Snape and Ron know the true story of what really happened that day on Druids Barrow.

"Harry wanted to tell the whole story; he felt we owed it to your memory to acknowledge your great sacrifice – and he hated the idea of receiving praise for Voldemort's destruction, when it was really you who deserved it. But Dumbledore knew I was obsessed with trying to find you and bring you back to our world – although, at the beginning none of the others held out much hope. But I was determined to try, so we decided to conceal your part in Voldemort's destruction. Otherwise, the secret of your powers would have emerged, and it

would have been impossible for you to live a normal life in this world, if you were ever able to return to it.

“In his official account, Dumbledore attributed your part in Voldemort’s downfall to the Ghost of Godric Gryffindor. He said it was the ghost who destroyed Voldemort’s magic – before Harry killed him. The ghost’s presence was corroborated by some of the Squibbed Death Eaters. But, of course, they all fled before Voldemort revealed the ghost’s true identity.”

“That’s a relief,” said Rick. “I’d hate to have to put up with the fame – and the pain – of being hounded by Rita Skeeter. I really don’t envy Harry his fame one bit – so how is he bearing up under the new notoriety?”

“Dumbledore has been shielding him from the Wizarding press – he banned them all from Hogwarts. That Skeeter woman had a field day just the same ... what was her ridiculous headline? Something like: ‘The Boy Who Lived slays He Who Claimed He Would Never Die.’”

“So what else has been happening?” asked Rick, anxious to catch up on everything he had missed.

“Well, Gryffindor won both the Quidditch Cup and House Cup – we were miles ahead after the five hundred points Dumbledore awarded when the Dark Creatures attacked. Oh – and Pansy Parkinson was expelled. She was the one who stunned Ginny on her way down to the greenhouses – and got her out of Hogwarts under an Invisibility Cloak. Ginny caught a glimpse of Pansy before she was stunned. Pansy got off pretty lightly, I thought. Apparently, she was acting under her father’s orders – he wasn’t so lucky.”

“Why, what happened to him?” asked Rick.

“He was one of the Death Eaters you Squibbed at Haughtons Heath,” said Hermione with a grin.

“Serves the bastard right!” said Rick. “So, where’s Harry gone for the holidays? I’d really like to see him.”

“He’s staying with the Weasleys,” replied Hermione. “But don’t worry, Rita and the paparazzi won’t be getting anywhere near him at the Burrow. Arthur Weasley is the new Minister of Magic, and he’s banned the press from the Burrow.”

“Wow, that’s great news!” said Rick smiling. “I can’t think of anyone better to restore the integrity of the Ministry after Fudge’s corrupt rule. So what happened to Fudge?”

“He was ignominiously drummed out of office a few days after Voldemort fell – along with all his lackeys. All the people Fudge had fired – because they’d opposed his draconian State of Emergency and corruption – got their old jobs back.”

“What about Percy Weasley?” as Rick.

“Dumbledore personally vouched for Percy. He revealed that Percy had been working as an operative for the Order of the Phoenix. He’s quite the hero – Ron and Ginny were so happy and proud of him when they found out. He’s working as his dad’s assistant – it’s a huge job getting the Ministry working properly again after what Fudge did to it. Percy’s got his own flat near Diagon Alley, but he visits the Burrow a lot – you’ll see him there for sure.”

“Why? Am I going to the Burrow?” asked Rick, eagerly.

“Yes, Ron and Ginny told their parents that you might be back soon —”

“Back? Back from where?” asked Rick.

“When you disappeared, Dumbledore announced that you’d been called home by your parents,” said Hermione.

“Well, it was kind of true in a way,” observed Rick with a smile.

“Yes,” laughed Hermione. “Mrs. Weasley insisted that when you came back you should spend the holidays at the Burrow.”

“That’ll be great,” said Rick happily. “Err ... but what about you?”

“Well ... I’ll be at the Burrow for the first couple of weeks as well,” she said smiling impishly at Rick. “Now that I’ve got you back I’m not in any hurry to part again. There’s going to be quite a crowd. Apart from Ron, Ginny and Harry – Padma’s coming to visit as well.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Rick happily. “So, have your parents returned to England now that Voldemort’s gone.”

“No way!” said Hermione. “They love the Greek islands. In a few weeks I’ll be leaving you at the Burrow – to spend a couple of weeks travelling with my parents in Portugal. But we’ll be returning to my parents’ place in the Greek islands at the end of July – in time for Harry’s birthday party.”

“What?” asked Rick, who was having trouble keeping up with Hermione’s holiday schedule.

“Everyone – Ron, Ginny, Harry, Padma – and you – will be coming to spend the last month of the holidays with us on the island – the house is right on the beach, by-the-way. Mum says it’s huge, and there’s plenty of room for everyone. You’ll all be coming the day before Harry’s birthday – so he can celebrate it in peace – without half the Wizarding world – and all of the press – trying to gatecrash.”

“Gosh – it’s going to be a great holiday,” said Rick, squeezing Hermione’s hand contentedly. “It’s almost too good to believe that I’m back here again – and I owe it all to you – for making my dream come true. Not only were you brilliant in figuring out how to give me back my magic and bring me back with you, but you were incredibly brave... You had no idea at all whether you would ever be able to return to this world again ... or if you would ever see your parents and friends again.”

“That’s true,” said Hermione, blushing at Rick’s praise, as they stopped at the castle entrance. “Although Firenze did say something, just before he left me at the Gateway of Reality, which gave me hope...”

“What was that?” asked Rick, intrigued. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Err ... it was something he said he saw in the Heavens ... something about great deeds that would be done by two Hogwarts students at some time in the future...” said Hermione, sounding uncharacteristically vague.

“I don’t understand – why would that give you hope – oh, was it you and me?” asked Rick.

“Err ... no, the Hogwarts students were ... err, our children,” said Hermione blushing fiercely, and staring down at the ground.

“Oh!” said Rick, his face lighting up with delight as he put his arms around Hermione. “That’s the most wonderful future I can imagine,” he said, smiling at her in the moonlight.

Hermione looked up at Rick smiling shyly. “Me too,” she said, before Rick silenced her with a kiss.

- The End -

I would like to acknowledge all of the betas who have helped me at different times: Rachel (aka GobletEnchantress), James, Pam, James, Ugly Duckling, Bluezy, Tokyo Charlie, Alison, ChocolateTruffle, Vanishing Act (aka Amena) and Joe6991. Thank you all for your help.

I would like to particularly acknowledge 3 of my betas, whose enthusiasm and encouragement have helped to spur me on and stay focussed:

James who has been with me the whole way through and has added so much to this fic with his constructive suggestions and promptings to be more descriptive. If my writing has improved over the course of this fic then I owe much of it to him – thank you James!

Rachel (aka GobletEnchantress) who has been with me almost from the start has done so much to make this fic more read-able ... and

saved me from comma-ing it to death. Your brilliant “eagle-eyes” never missed a typo – thank you Rachel!

Pam, who joined me around chapter ten and stayed with me ever since, and was always the first one to get each chapter back to me. Without you Pam, this fic would have been several hundred words longer – and all the words would have been “that” – thank you for your help and enthusiasm.

I feel very sad to have reached the end of this fic. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it! At this stage, I am not planning a sequel ... but, who knows, I may go into GoGG-withdrawal and be unable to stop myself. After book 6 is out, I may feel inspired to start another fic, with a new storyline carrying on from there.

Rachel (aka GobletEnchantress) sent me a beautiful poem which she wrote after beta-ing the final chapter and Epilogue. It captures Hermione’s emotion wonderfully, when Rick disappeared – and her absolute determination to find him and bring him back. Thank you Rachel, your poem is very touching – and so, I leave the final word to you:

TOMORROW IS ONLY YEARS AWAY

by Rachel

-

TELL THE YEARS I WILL COME

THROUGH HELL BE BARRED UPON MY PATH

AND HEAVEN'S MYST KEEP ME AT BAY

TELL THE YEARS, I'LL FIND MY WAY

-

TELL THE YEARS I WILL COME

TO MARCH UPON NO HOLLOW GROUND
IF HELL BE KEEPING YOUR SOUL FOR ME
TELL THE YEARS, I'LL SET YOU FREE

-

TELL THE YEARS I WILL COME
THROUGH HEART OF PITY DIES AND MOURNS
AND ANGRY TEARS TOO SOON GONE LOST
THAT HAD LEFT NOTHING BUT A LONELY GHOST

-

TELL THE YEARS I WILL COME
I'LL FIND THE PATH AMONG MY HEART
AND SET YOU BLEEDING ON SKY HIGH
TELL THE YEARS I'LL LOVE OR DIE

-

TELL THE YEARS I WILL COME
AMONGST THE EMPTINESS THAT'S FILLED MY HEART
AMONGST THE WEARINESS THAT MAKES ME WHOLE
TELL THE YEARS I'LL TAKE YOU HOME

-

TELL THE YEARS I HAVE COME

FOR MESSAGES GIVEN AND MESSAGES LOST

TO BE READY AS A SUMMER DAY

FOR TOMORROW IS ONLY YEARS AWAY